

AFRICAN MUSIC BOULTON

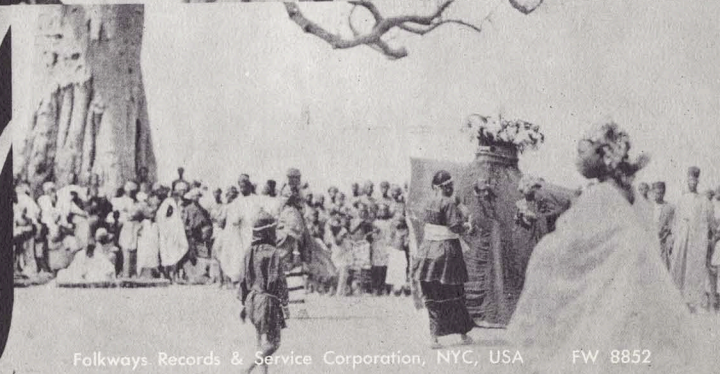
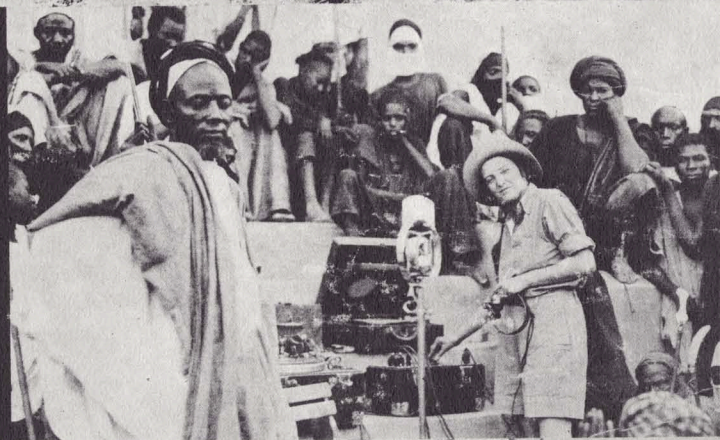
# *African* MUSIC

Recorded by LAURA C. BOULTON on  
the Straus West African Expedition  
of Field Museum of Natural History.

FOLKWAYS FW 8852

AFRICAN MUSIC

Descriptive Notes Are Inside Pocket



Folkways Records & Service Corporation, NYC, USA

FW 8852



# African Music



*Mrs. Boulton recording songs at Timbuktu.*

*Recorded by*

LAURA C. BOULTON

*on the*

STRAUS WEST AFRICAN EXPEDITION OF  
FIELD MUSEUM OF NATIONAL HISTORY, CHICAGO

168 EAST 71<sup>ST</sup> STREET

November 24, 1939.

The authentic and unique records which Mrs. Laura Boulton has brought back from four scientific expeditions through Africa give us a new conception of the variety and fascination of the music of the African natives and of the important role that music fills in their lives. These records are a valuable contribution to the musician and the anthropologist and should be of great interest to the layman as well.

Walter H. Henshaw

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Photographs by courtesy of Field Museum.

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## COMMENTS

By

LAURA C. BOULTON

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### PREFATORY NOTE

**M**USIC is by far the most vital and the most demonstrative expression in the life of the Negro. From morning till night, from the cradle to the grave, everything is done to the rhythm of his music. It is a living art-form passed on by word of mouth from one generation to the next. It is a means of preserving for posterity the traditions, ambitions and lore of the tribe. Music performs a vitally important role in maintaining the unity of the social group. Singing the same songs in the same way at the same time binds the individuals together, and a strong group feeling is established. The ceremonial music functions most vitally in this respect. Whether religious or secular, improvised or traditional, the songs have a powerful influence on the social group and bring about a feeling of harmony.

Among the songs which make up the group repertoire, there is a wide range of subjects, some old, some new. Every occasion and every activity has its song or group of songs. There are songs for love and work and war, historical songs, fervent religious chants and frenzied dance tunes. Whether the African sings a gay, rollicking play song, a boisterous boat song, a gentle lullaby, or a dignified noble lament, always he pours out his emotions in an appealing form of music. The texts of the songs make up the poetry of the people. The verses show the same feeling for form, balance and symmetry which is apparent in all artistic expressions of the Africans.



*Musicians with native harps, French Sudan.*



African musical instruments are of many kinds and vary from tribe to tribe. Their unusual tone color, their uses and role in the society, their religious importance in the life of the people,—all are subjects of study of the utmost significance, from the point of view of both cultural and musical research.

Music in Africa is for the whole community and everyone from the youngest to the oldest participates. It is so interwoven with the work, the play, the social and religious activities of the natives, that it is difficult to isolate it and study it apart from its role in the life of the people. African music, while more complex in certain aspects than the music of other preliterate people, has certain things in common with all primitive music. There is a definite tendency of the melodies to progress downward as from tension to rest. Usually the phrases are short and repeated over and over again. Fractional intervals (smaller than semi-tones) seem to be regularly employed. The scales are many and varied. While the music of most other primitive people of the world consists of melody and rhythm only, the Africans have evolved an interesting form of part music. Antiphonal singing, with soloist and responding chorus, is prevalent all over Africa. There is a definite singing technique characteristic of the Negroes, a frequent vagueness of pitch, a short glissando preceding the actual attack, a raucous vocal quality cultivated by the women, various *Sprechstimme* devices, occasional humming instead of singing, etc. This mode of singing is so typical that it goes with the Negro wherever he goes and gives his music even in the New World an African flavor.

It is perhaps in the field of rhythm that African music has the most to contribute to the Western World. Rhythm is the governing impulse in the life of the native, and its most appealing expression is through his music. Our modern musicians are stimulated by the complex rhythmic organization of African music and by the forceful, free outlines of the melodies with their strange intervals and exotic tonal combinations.

Studies in primitive music have been in progress for years, but the opportunities for work in African music have been very limited and the technical difficulties great. With the development of recording equipment, this study has become an accurate science. Thanks to the financial support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, excellent electric recording apparatus was built for my work in Africa. With this equipment it was possible to record instruments whose tones and melodies had never before been preserved.

The records included in this album were made on my fourth African expedition, in French and British West Africa. Most of the native tribes of this region are very highly developed culturally. Their social organization, their religious and economic life are much more complex than among the less highly organized groups of East, Central and South Africa. The artistic expressions of the West Africans have aroused great interest. They are known primarily for their fine sculpture, but their dance forms and particularly their music, although less known, are also remarkable.



## DESCRIPTION OF RECORDS

### FRENCH SUDAN

*Baukoumana, Bamako Cercle, Malinke Tribe*

#### Record 84-A. WAR SONG, Harp with Drums.

(See photograph on page 3)

The Malinke, a well-known tribe of Sudanese Negroes, have extremely varied music, both vocal and instrumental. The instruments recorded here illustrate the musical ingenuity of the African, revealing his feeling for melody in the *balafon* or native xylophone orchestra, and his prodigious sense of rhythm in the *bulon bata* or "war drum," as he calls it.

The *bulon bata* shown in the photograph on page 3 of this booklet, is classed with the African harps. There is a huge gourd resonator whose open end is covered with a goat skin membrane, laced on to the gourd by leather thongs. An oblong opening in the resonator is considered essential for the desired tonal effect. Three strings of sinew are stretched from the resonator to a curved neck. An oblong piece of tin is fastened to the end of the neck, with a border of small metal rings loosely attached. This device constantly vibrates as the strings are plucked and provides a humming background for the melody. The instrument is called a "war drum" because in the former days of tribal warfare, the musicians who played on it led the king and warriors to battle, beating on the gourd resonators as though they were actually drums.

This record is a song of war to incite the warriors to fight. The *bulon bata* is accompanied by three drums. The three tones of the strings, (approximately E flat, B flat, g) can be distinguished in the ensemble even through the intricate rhythms of the drums.

#### Record 84-B. SONG OF PRAISE, Xylophone Orchestra.

The native xylophone shown in the accompanying photograph, is the leading one of an orchestra of five xylophones which is playing the accompaniment for a festival called *concuba*. The spirit in whose honor the dance is given is represented by a native clothed in a loose flowing robe of scarlet with an impressive head-dress of ostrich plumes. He is attended by small boys in scarlet robes and masks and dancing women. The fetish dancers are called *jibilenki*.

(See photograph of dance on cover.)



*Leader of native xylophone orchestra.*

The native xylophone (or *marimba*) is called *balafon* by the Malinke. It was described by a Portuguese explorer as early as 1586. The xylophone of our "swing" bands has changed considerably from the primitive idea brought by the African slaves to the New World. In



Africa the xylophone has many forms, those with free keys or staves, those with fixed staves, those without gourd resonators and those with one, two or many gourds. Some are built on a curved frame (one which I brought from Angola had a curve of eight feet) ; some are low and flat. In one form common in Africa the instrument has gourd resonators which are carefully graduated from tiny ones to huge ones to correspond to the tones produced by the staves (see photograph on cover). Small openings on the sides of the gourds are covered with pieces of a certain spider's nest, and when the instrument is played, these add a pleasant buzzing sound. The type recorded here consists of a strong light frame supporting sixteen staves of wood of different sizes. Small round gourds, two for each key or stove, are suspended below the staves on the wooden frame of the instrument.

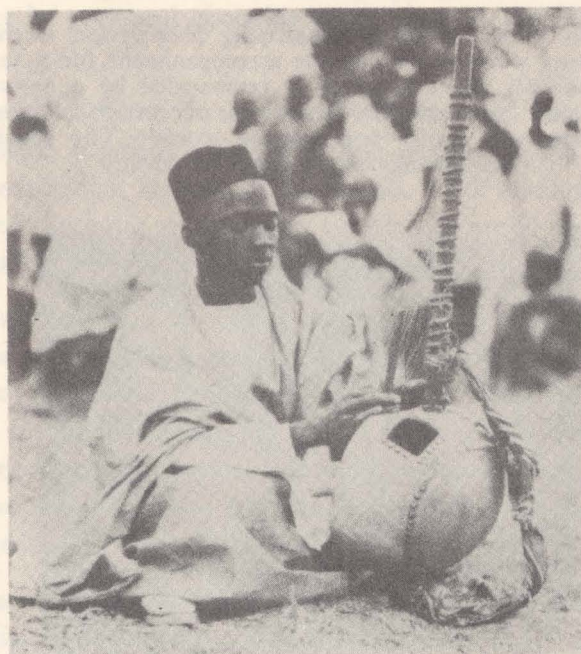
The Africans have great skill in playing the xylophone. It is played with two small beaters like drum sticks, with a ball of native rubber on the end of each beater. The musicians of this orchestra are wearing bells on their hands to furnish a background for the xylophone melody.

Throughout French West Africa, songs are frequently used as an important moral agent in the community. Songs of satire are very powerful because there is no punishment an African dreads more than being held up to the ridicule of his fellowmen. On the other hand, songs about worthy citizens, praising them for their virtues, encourage others to follow their excellent example. There is a large repertoire of songs of praise for the chiefs and dignitaries of the region.

The song recorded here is a song of praise sung in honor of the ruler in power.

## FRENCH SUDAN

*Bamako, Bamako Cercle, Bambara Tribe*



*Musician playing harp or kora*

Record 85-A. SONG FOR CHIEF, KORA.

The Bambara tribe is a large and important tribe found chiefly in the central part of the French Sudan. Their music and musical instruments are very highly developed. The more melodious instruments, such as the *kora*, recorded here, are frequently played by professional musicians who wander from village to village like the minstrels of old.



Professional players of musical instruments in Africa are, as far as I have observed, always men. The singers who lead the songs in the group-singing and dancing are of either sex, depending on whether the ceremonies are for men or women. They frequently improvise new compositions about a person or an event. If the person about whom the song is composed has considerable prestige in the community or if the event is significant and concerns an important tribal custom, the song may live and be added to the permanent repertoire of the tribe; otherwise, it is usually soon forgotten. Occasional inconsequential songs have survived, however, just as in our western world, for no other reason than the fact that the melody, and particularly its rhythm, appealed to the popular taste. Often new words are composed and set to old tunes, and this, as is well-known, is also common practice in more civilized countries. Among West African tribes in the French Sudan, the professional minstrels have a social status curiously like that of their European counterparts of a few centuries ago. They are powerful because their cleverness in improvising is so great and their tendency to use songs for blackmailing purposes is so well known, that they are feared, and of course, hated. They collect tribute both for the satire they withhold and for the praise they utter and many of them grow wealthy. But they are not regarded as reputable, and are denied the rites of burial in certain tribes.

The *kora* is the most elaborate instrument which I have recorded in Africa. It is classed with the harps, because the strings are perpendicular to the resonator. There are 21 strings of unequal length, stretched perpendicularly on both sides of a high bridge, ten strings on one side, eleven on the other. A sturdy straight "neck" passes through a huge skin-covered gourd resonator, extending beyond the gourd several inches so that it can rest on the ground while being played. The strings are attached to the upper part of the neck with leather rings which serve instead of pegs. At the lower end they are fastened to a prop where the neck emerges from the gourd. The instrument is tuned by twisting the cloth rings, thus making the strings more or less taut. The musician plucks the strings as one plucks the strings of a modern harp.

The song recorded here is a song of praise to the chief. It is interesting to note that the player seems to be humming an accompaniment to the instrument rather than employing the *kora* to accompany his song.

#### Record 85-B. DANCE SONG, Flutes, Bells, Drums.

Of all the wind instruments in Africa, flutes are used especially for melodies of rather elaborate form. They are played widely throughout West Africa, generally two or three together, sometimes accompanied by drums. The flute players are often attached to the court of the king, or paramount chief, and frequently become famous for their virtuosity.

The flutes are carved of wood, made from bamboo, or as among the Ovimbundu of Angola, they may be a combination of both—with mouthpiece and endpiece carved of wood and a central section of bamboo. The two flutes of the Bambara tribe heard in this record are of bamboo with five holes each.

In this dance song, two flutes called *Fle* playing in unison, are accompanied by a native iron bell (*chiningini mongo*) which is struck with a warthog's tusk, two small drums (*perinkaba*), and three arm-pressure drums (*dunka*). These arm-pressure or hour-glass drums are very sophisticated instruments which can at times actually play melodies. The resonating chamber of wood is carved in the form of an hour-glass. The two drumheads are attached to each other by thongs of untanned hide. The drummer beats the drumhead with a small curved stick while holding the instrument under his arm in such a way that he can tighten or relax the thongs to vary the pitch. When played in orchestras of from five to twelve in number, the hour-glass drums produce melodies and rhythms of remarkably subtle and varied nature.

### FRENCH SUDAN

#### *Timbuktu, Tuareg Tribe*

#### Record 86-A. WAR SONG, Lute.

Timbuktu, situated in the Southern Sahara where the Niger River encroaches on the desert, is "the meeting place of the camel and the canoe." It is still a prosperous trading center, although no longer the fabulously wealthy city of the legends. Moors and Tuaregs from the North, Sudanese from the West, and the more primitive blacks from the South, make up the population of this mysterious city.



The Tuaregs, nomads of the desert, are the most picturesque people of the Timbuktu region. They are said to be descended from the same original stock as the Berbers of North Africa. The Tuaregs are called "People of the Veil" because the men wrap their heads in a native-woven cloth which is never removed, not even for eating. It is a great protection against the heat and wind and sand of the desert. They are fierce, aristocratic people, very proud of the brave deeds of the ancestors.

In the war song on this record, the old man is singing of the bravery of a chief and his marvelous horse "Yali." By singing of the warlike qualities of the ancestors he stirs the young warriors to fighting pitch. The musician accompanies his song with the *tehardent*, a three-stringed instrument resembling the ancient Egyptian lute.



*Tuaregs, Timbuktu.*

#### **Record 86-B. HERDING SONG, MARRIAGE SONG, LULLABY, Water Drum.**

The voice is the instrument which plays the largest part in the music of any primitive people, and this is true in Africa. Peoples are distinguished more by the manner in which they sing than by what they sing. Certain groups develop definite singing techniques and one can often recognize the songs of particular tribes by this technique more easily than by the melodic or rhythmic structure.

This fact is well illustrated by the Tuaregs. The voice production in these songs requires immense tension of the muscles of the throat. In the women's songs on this record the raucous quality of the voice is not an accident, but is deliberately cultivated and is a definite musical trait of the group.

Here three songs are recorded in immediate succession. The first is a Herding song, sung by two boys without accompaniment, telling their goats and camels that they are going to war. The second is a marriage dance song sung by a male soloist and a chorus of sixteen Tuareg women. It is accompanied by the water drum, tuned not by heating as usual, but by wetting with water. A wooden pot with a central diameter of eighteen inches and a sheepskin drumhead twelve inches in diameter was partly filled with water. It was tipped from time to time to moisten the membrane, thus changing its tautness and therefore the pitch of the drum. This is a rare example of the drum in Africa being played by women rather than by men. They sing, "Play well, dance well, for a fine man is marrying. He is good, rich, generous. He will give us (musicians) splendid gifts." The last song is a lullaby in which the mother sings. "My son, why do you cry? Your father has money, goats, camels, sheep, and many slaves. Do not cry. You will be a rich man soon."

One will notice sometimes, in this and other records, very simple and brief heterophonic passages interpolated in unison singing.



## BRITISH CAMEROONS

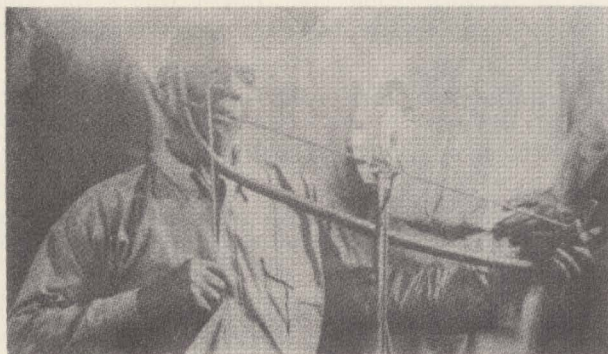
### *Buea, Cameroons Province, Bakwiri Tribe*

#### Record 87-A. WRESTLING MATCH SONG, Horn.

The Bakwiri live on the slopes of Mt. Cameroon, a more or less active volcano, which rises out of the Atlantic to a height of 13,353 feet almost on the equator. Their habitat is the glorious mountain rain forests, and their villages and plantations extend from the seashore up the flanks of the mountain to an altitude of more than 3,000 feet.

The Bakwiri music, just as their language, is very much like that of the great Duala group of the French Cameroons; both are of Bantu stock. The music of the Bakwiri is closer to the music of Central African tribes than any of the other melodies included in this album of records. Their hunting songs, the songs of their secret societies, their dance songs, all their musical outpourings have a spontaneity sometimes lacking among the more highly developed groups such as the Sudanese. The Bakwiri have fewer and less elaborate musical instruments than the tribes of the French Sudan. The most interesting wind instruments recorded, were the carved wooden horns used for directing the hunt and those used for the wrestling match.

The horn for the wrestling match is made from a small tusk of an elephant. Wrestling is a common form of amusement in West African communities, and the wrestlers, like the professional troupes of dancers and the wandering "minstrels," are usually connected with the market place. Among the Bakwiri the wrestlers are encouraged by singing, shouting, and the blowing of the ivory horn. This record is a song for the Bakwiri wrestling match. It represents probably the nearest African approach to the organized cheering of western athletic contests. The recitative device is of particular interest.



*Recording musical bow.*

#### Record 87-B. ORPHAN'S WAIL, Musical Bow.

The Bakwiri have among their stringed instruments an extraordinary one, the musical bow, which they use to accompany songs. It is developed from an ordinary archer's bow, transformed into a musical instrument by the ingenuity of the Africans. As shown in the accompanying photograph, the musician in front of the microphone is holding the lower end of the bow firmly by the second, third, and fourth fingers of the left hand. This leaves the first finger and thumb free to hold a stick which is pressed from time to time against a certain preselected place on the string. In his right hand, the player holds a small stick or reed with which he strikes the bow string with a staccato action. The bow is held so that it vibrates between the open lips but does not touch them. Single overtones are amplified by the cavities of the head, by changing the form of the mouth, with the same technique that is used in playing the Jew's harp. By leaving the string free or by stopping it with the stick in his left hand, the player can produce two different fundamental tones in succession. However, since these two tones are constantly accompanied by the amplified overtones, they may be said to produce the effect of two consecutively progressive chords. In the present record the fundamental tones are at an interval of a major second.

This instrument is of great musical interest for it shows that the native musician, when he taps the string, hears and makes use of the acoustically natural harmonies which he colors



variedly by isolating and reinforcing certain overtones. Aside from this coloristic effect, the particular selection of overtones is also responsible for the quaint melodic line that their peculiar succession produces.

The result of this technique is clearly heard in this record. A melody is actually executed on the harmonics and thus sounds above the bass of the fundamental tones of the string. The song is the wail of an orphan: "e-e-e-e" represents his crying.

This soft-voiced instrument produces such a fragile tone, that it is sometimes difficult to hear it even when standing nearby. And it is due to one of the miracles of the modern technical invention, the phonograph, that this fairy-like melody was captured and preserved.

## NIGERIA

*Lagos,\* Colony Province, Kru Tribe*

### Record 88-A. BATTLE SIGNALS, War Horn.

The use of musical instruments for communication in Africa is well-known. Travelers have often observed and scientists described the practice, but there is need of much more detailed study in this field. The technique is particularly interesting to students of linguistics because the messages played on the instruments are closely related to the language of the people. The drum language, for instance, is not a system like our Morse code of dots and dashes, but it is actually based on the musical elements of speech, rhythm and melody.

Communication by means of signals on whistles, horns and trumpets is frequently found among West African groups. These instruments vary from tiny, primitive whistles of baked clay to huge, elaborately carved horns of ivory. In the days of inter-tribal warfare, this was a very important means of communication, used for warning the village of the enemy's approach, sounding the call to arms for the warriors, challenging the enemy, directing action and announcing developments in battle.

Most West African languages are "tone" languages, definite tones or registers conveying definite meanings. The signals of the horns are based on the tones and rhythm of the language and frequently follow the patterns of speech very closely.

Communication on the horns may be based on as few as ten signals depending on the instrument used; or an almost unlimited conversation can take place between two players remote from each other. Sometimes the horns are used purely for display by those who are adept in the art of trumpeting.

In this record the horn calls the warriors to battle, directs their action, and finally announces the victorious outcome. This horn was recorded at the Kru settlement in Lagos, Nigeria, by a group of natives who had recently arrived from their original home in Sasstown, Liberia. The messages on the horn have been translated on the record into the native Kru language, and then into English by my native interpreter. His interpretation follows:

"Everyone be prepared! The war's coming!

If anybody run away, he's going to get the whip!

The warriors tell him to run quick to the military.

Gather in all the women from the farm!

They are coming on the right hand of the farm, on the right side.

They are now cross the river on the other side.

Gather troops on the left! Prepare! They are coming near you there.

Oh, they are not retreat. They are not retreat. They are coming!

Come here quick! Come here quick! Run, run, run, quick!

The guns, the guns fire. The guns fire now!

That's right. They get them, they get them, they get them, they get them, they are get them now!!!"

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\* Recorded at Lagos Kru settlement. Native habitat Sasstown, Liberia.



There is a shout of victory at the end, but the victorious cries are always mingled with wailing of the women whose men do not return from the battle.

*Benin, Benin Province, Bini Tribe*

Record 88-B. CEREMONIAL SONGS FOR OBA'S WIVES AND OBA, Rattles and Drums.

Benin, in Southern Nigeria, has furnished the Western world with romantic and vivid tales ever since it was discovered by the Portuguese navigators in the fifteenth century. The Bini, an off-shoot of the Yoruba nation, are still an important group, and the Oba, or king, of Benin is still a powerful ruler with more than a million subjects.

Benin, the capital, is often referred to as the "City of Blood," due to the sacrificial rites which were being observed when the first English expedition visited this native city in 1896. Yet the Oba was not regarded by his subjects as a cruel man. He was simply carrying out the tribal traditions which had been handed down through a score or more of dynasties. The taking of Benin City led to the discovery of art treasures exceeding all expectations. Castings in bronze, terra cotta heads, carved ivory tusks, remarkably well executed, were removed to European museums where they have been a source of inspiration to the artists of our own epoch.

The music of this region furnishes additional evidence of the genuine artistic sense of the African. The songs here recorded are a part of the great annual ceremony held in honor of



*Royal musicians, Benin.*

former kings who became great deities after death. This ceremony in former days lasted three months and was the one in progress when the English first came to Benin. The old men heard in this record have actually performed the ceremony when it was a great orgy of human sacrifice. These royal musicians have great prestige in the community.

Near the end of the ceremony the first song of this record is sung as accompaniment to the dance of the Oba's wives. The Oba's song follows immediately (both in the ceremony and on this record). After this final song the priest kills the victims and offers the sacrifice to the gods.

These songs are so old that the singers could not give a direct translation of the text. They knew the meaning of each song and its place in the ceremony, but not the meaning of the individual words. The songs are accompanied by rattles and drums of great age and great ritualistic significance. On the royal drums (shown in the photograph) the whole figure of the Oba is carved.

This chorus is an excellent example of African part-singing and of the antiphonal or responsorial singing in which a chorus answers a soloist. Antiphonal singing is found so generally throughout Africa that it must be considered basic.



## NIGERIA

### *Ifon, Ondo Province, Bini Tribe*

#### Record 89-A. SECRET SOCIETY DANCE SONG, 5 Drums.

Secret societies are common in West Africa. In Nigeria they exist for religious, medical, economic, and social purposes. Some of them actually have the power of life and death over the people.

This song belongs to the *Ashiko* society. It is an old song used to call the society together for a meeting or dance. There are seven singers and they sing, "We are ready, brothers. *Adinago, adinago.*"

The song is accompanied by five rectangular tambourine-like drums, called *bebe*, *samba*, *briz*, *jiagban*, *dadu*. The playing and manufacture of these drums are special professions. The drumhead of vellum is attached by pegs or nails to a frame of the heavy resonant wood known as African mahogany. An inner frame, which may be pushed against the drumhead by means of wedges at the ends of a crossbar provided for holding the drum, controls the pitch.

The psychological effect of the drums upon the Africans is frequently spectacular. Dancers are sometimes borne writhing away. Even in the brief dance song recorded here one feels the tempo increasing and the intensity building up.

On the reverse side of this record, these identical drums are recorded without song, and it is not difficult to imagine the hypnotic and stimulating effect produced by the continuation, hour after hour, of the drum performances.

#### Record 89-B. SECRET SOCIETY DRUMS, 5 Drums.

The drum beat is the pulse of Africa. The native is born to it, dies to it, works to it, worships to it, dances to it for days and nights on end. It brings the spirit world close to man. Through the aid of the drum, ordinary routine may become a devout act of worship. Drum rhythms frequently accompany communal activities and at the same time give them an emotional significance all but inconceivable to the Western world.

The drum, aside from its musical qualities, is the chief means of communication. It is telephone and radio, village newspaper and regional telegraph all in one. The signalling drums are still used to communicate many types of messages throughout great distances in Africa. But the drum functions primarily as a musical instrument, rather than as radio and telegraph.

The Africans, with their extraordinary sense of rhythm, have elaborated the drum more fully than any other people in the world. Nowhere has the drum such varied forms and so many uses. There are whole orchestras of drums alone which produce symphonies of rhythm and melody that make our modern composers envious. Rhythms too complicated to be described in words are combined with deep resonant tones to produce a bewildering beauty of performance.

As with our swing bands, so with the African dance orchestra, the drums stir the dancers to such a point that an ordinary dance frequently becomes a marathon. Not only are the drums the motive force of dances, but they accompany forms of work where unison counts and where rhythm can make arms and legs move faster or more easily.

In this record, the drums accompanying the preceding song are recorded without singing. Because of the complexity of the rhythms, each drum has been recorded singly at first so that the individual tones and rhythmic patterns can be distinctly heard. Then, one by one, they join the ensemble, piling overtones one upon another until the ear and the mind of the white man are in a state at which he is not easily able to distinguish between the various constituent elements. The succession of beats goes on and on building up an exotic and unforgettable symphony in rhythm.