The Banda, who number about 400,000, form the largest ethnic group in the Central African Republic. Although their history and genealogy are not well known with any certainty, it would appear that they came from the East, probably from the region that corresponds to the present Sudanese-Central-African borders in the first half of the 19th century, and subsequently to have crossed the Nile. They were followed by several waves of traders. They now occupy the upper reaches of the Uaka, the Kotto, the Gribingo, a region of bush-covering savannah grassland. The Banda people are divided into more than fifty subgroups, each of which has its own customs, speech and music. The Linda and the Dakpa are among the most numerous branches of the Banda people. Being neighbours, and even having established themselves in the very heart of the Banda country, they share to a large extent their music, present a problem as it is not possible to distinguish certain kinds of expression. For example, although the Dakpa and the Linda both have ensembles of seven horns, the form of the instruments, the repertoire and the techniques of musical elaboration vary markedly from one group to another. As in all parts of this cultural area, music is closely associated with social and religious life. Even now it still fulfills a central function at all the events of any importance held in the traditional village.

The vocal music of the Banda is largely monodic, with no instrumental support – apart from the variously pitched horns – which usually amounts to an "orchestration" of the sung melodies – can give rise to elaborate and highly complex polyphonic structures. This applies in particular to the music for horns of the Linda and the Dakpa. The ongo ensembles are closely associated with the ancestors and with the cult of the twins, performed in succession by the master drummer on the lowest-pitched instrument. Each piece has a corresponding sung melody. In this recording, we hear the song ulen (which depicts a bird of prey) rendered first by an ensemble of four flutes (track 9) and then (track 10) sung by the flautists themselves, all of them old people, who belong to the very small number of villagers who can still remember this music.

The repertoire of these "bamboo horns" is very limited, consisting of less than ten items. It is now totally traditional; having been handed down, it is not subject to any modification. The special feature of the ongo-horn music consists in the
Three pieces from the repertoire are played in this recording (track 1), another almost without interruption. A woman wearing a belt of fruit husks that rattle to the movement of her steps, dances round the music, her girdle picking up one another almost keeps the time. The first piece, dangeve, tells of the misfortunes of a man whose pregnant wife left him to go to an assembly of dancers. The second, dayeuk, is a song of mourning. It is sung after a corpse has been dressed and placed in state under the awning of a hut. The third piece, mbaya, is a song of mourning.

The repertoire of the mbaya contains about twenty items. Of the first piece, which is played with a characteristic which is very rare in this part of Africa, namely that of not having a measured rhythm. The second piece, which is unwound in fragments, is accompanied by a woman dancing round the oral cavity during the whole duration of the sound, which gives it a hoarse, guttural quality.

The dance of initiates, "Brother. I am suffering" (track B) belongs to the repertoire of dances which the young neophytes learn during the period of initiation. The title refers to the hard physical trials to which the adolescents are subjected: various forms of forced labour, flagellation, etc. The rhythmic support is provided by an ensemble consisting of twelve end-blown whistles, the wooden drum is to give the ensemble a support in the form of rhythmic patterns that belong to the "flutter-tongue" family. Nothing is left to chance. Each musician knows exactly what to do, as above: the melodies are sung and played by the same performers. The superimposition of these four instrumental parts produces a sort of polyphonic ostinato against which the singing and dancing are superimposed by a responsorial couplet attached by the leader of the ensemble to his companions the choreographic moves they play during their initiation period. Among the Linda, the "initiate," the "sufferer," the "flute," the "tongue within the oral cavity" are portrayed. The ensemble consists of twelve end-blown whistles, the wooden drum is to give the ensemble a support in the form of rhythmic patterns that belong specially to each of the pieces with a measured rhythm, and also to maintain an unbroken continuity between the different pieces that make up the suite. A pair of jingles worn by a woman dancing round the instrumentalists completes the rhythmic aspect of the music.

The titles of the pieces — those with no measured rhythm — correspond to those of Dakpa folk songs: war songs, laments, songs of mockery, the complaint of a lonely man, or the songs in which serious animals, birds and fish are portrayed. The ensemble consists of twelve end-blown whistles, the wooden drum is to give the ensemble a support in the form of rhythmic patterns that belong specially to each of the pieces with a measured rhythm, and also to maintain an unbroken continuity between the different pieces that make up the suite. A pair of jingles worn by a woman dancing round the instrumentalists completes the rhythmic aspect of the music.

Like the ongo of the Linda, the mbaya horns are associated with the children and young adolescents, boys and young men, in a way or another almost keeps the time. One musician knows exactly what to do, as above: the melodies are sung and played by the same performers. The superimposition of these four instrumental parts produces a sort of polyphonic ostinato against which the singing and dancing are superimposed. The ongo, "Brother, I am suffering," is a sort of rhythmic pattern that belongs specially to each of the pieces with a measured rhythm, and also to maintain an unbroken continuity between the different pieces that make up the suite. A pair of jingles worn by a woman dancing round the instrumentalists completes the rhythmic aspect of the music.

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La formation que l'on entend ici (plages 

Ia danse des initiées, "Mon frère, je souffre" (plage [i]), fait partie du répertoire de danse que les jeunes nègres apprennent au cours de leur retraite initia­
tique. Son titre évoque les dures épreuves physiques que les adolescents y subissent : corvées diverses, flagellations et enfin la circoncision. La musique s'accompagne du tambour, du fleute et du sifflet. Les trompes ongo, à chaque pièce instrumentale correspond une mélodie chantée. On entend ici le chant gégewa (qui évoque un oiseau de proie), exécuté d'abord par un ensemble de quatre flûtes (plage [ii]) puis chanté par les flûtistes eux-mêmes (plage [ii]), tous gens de seconde classe. On retrouve de nombreux rares villageois à s'en souvenir encore.

Les ongo-ngala sont confectionnés dans des tronçons de bambou à paroi épaisse coupo­lées de façon à ce que l'usure ne dévaste pas le manche de l'instrument. Comme les trompes Linda, chaque sifflet n'émite qu'un seul son et les ongo-ngala sont adaptés à une certaine techni­que d'imitation et au style de jeu de l'instrument. Les Linda utilisent les ongo par paquets d'au moins 72 pièces dans la formation pentatonique, ce qui limite la puissance de l'instrument et permet de remettre en place les pieds épais et muni à ses extrémités de deux poignées. Les flancs convexes du tambour, séparés sur la partie supérieure par une fente longitudinale d'en­

La danse des initiées est un rituel complexe sonore, qui consiste en des imitations stylisées de différents animaux et oiseaux.

La musique de tambour des Linda, les trompes mbaya sont associées aux rites de passage des garçons ; c'est au cours de leur retraite initia­tique que les enfants appréhendent, à travers les formes des instru­ments, le développement du mouvement rituel. Les formes des instruments se manifestent également au cours des cérémonies funèbres. L'orchestre est composé de douze trompettes à embouchure terminale, de taille différente (de 170 à 35 cm, environ). Chaque instrument porte un nom symbolique, d'animal ou d'oiseau. Le soutien rythmique est fourni par un ako­
gen, petit tambour de bois à fente. Tout comme les ongo et les sifflets ngala, les mbaya sont accordés entre eux selon l'échelle pentatonique dessinée par l'orchestre : l'instrument n'émite qu'un seul et même son. Ce son peut être utilisé comme note de signature musicale ou encore comme solfe enjolivant le rythme grâce à la technique de jeu dit "flatter-zunge", qui consiste à faire rouler la langue à l'intérieur de la bouche. Ce son a pour effet de conférer un timbre guttural, rauc.

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MUSICS AND MUSICIANS OF THE WORLD

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
BANDA POLYPHONY

Recordings, commentary & photos: SIMHA AROM

LINDA MUSIC / MUSIQUE LINDA

A. Music for ongo ensemble
Musique pour orchestre de ongo:

1. Ndrajé balendo (A.1)
Initiation song / Chant d'initiation
4’16

2. Eci ameya (horns / trompes, A.2)
Song for the cult of the twins
Chant pour le culte des jumeaux
1’44

3. Eci ameya (voices / voix, A.3)
1’53

4. Ebéna ka cemato, lament / Chant de deuil (A.4)
4’00

5. Music for dancing / Musique de danse, gboyo
2’41

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