

EARLY HISTORICAL ILLUSTRATIONS OF WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICAN MUSIC

by

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Early pictorial documents are generally considered to have a controversial ethnographic source value, but it can be shown in individual cases that detailed analysis of such documents often reveals new historical insights and may also be of interest to ethnomusicology.

As a reference work we take "Monumenta Ethnographica" (early ethnographic pictorial documents)*. The first volume of this work¹, published in 1962 in Graz, Austria, deals with Africa south of the Sahara, and contains illustrations taken from early travel books, which to a large extent figure among the rarissima not only of the antiquarian book market, but of well-equipped libraries as well. These illustrations are valuably supplemented by the original explanatory texts. From among the authors mentioned we present as examples for West Africa Pieter de Marees (1605, 1603)², Wilhelm Johann Müller (1676)³, Otto Friedrich von der Gröben (1694)⁴, and François Froger (1698)⁵, and for the area of Central Africa the authors Odoardo Lopez (1591)⁶, Oliver Dapper (1670)⁷, Giovanni Antonion Cavazzi (1687)⁸, and Girolamo Merolla (1692)⁹. In all these authors we find both illustrations and textual references to the subject of interest here: musical instruments.

West Africa: the sources.

Pieter de Marees (1605, 1603) probably came from the south of the Netherlands and may have been Flemish, as he belonged to the southern Dutch family De Maretz. Nothing is known of his life except that at the end of 1600 he sailed with three Dutch ships on a trading voyage from Texel to the Gold Coast. In his book we find 20 illustrations; two of them concern Cape Lopez and Benin. The edition of the brothers De Bry¹⁰ published in 1603, shows (plates 73 to 75) a few additional illustrations which are missing in the Dutch original or the parallel editions respectively, and which are to be considered as fanciful, and have therefore almost no ethnographic source value.

Completely different, however, the pictures presented by Pieter de Marees! The drawings used as models were probably made by himself on the West Coast and reproduced as etchings in Europe. A French or Dutch text is added to each of the illustrations. From the text with picture No. 15 (*Le triumphe de la noblissement des Gentilhommes*, Fig. 1), we learn for example that all thoughts and endeavours of the inhabitants of the Gold Coast were directed towards becoming a nobleman. With reference to letter 'F' it says "Women play cymbals and other instruments". In the picture we also see three other musicians walking in front of the person promoted to nobleman, a drummer and two horn blowers (the horns are probably of ivory and side-blown). But the nature of the women's instruments is hard to recognise from the picture.

* By the author of this article.—Ed.

¹ MONUMENTA ETHNOGRAPHICA. Early ethnographical pictorial documents. Vol. I, Black Africa. Ethnographical supervision by Walter Hirschberg. Graz, 1962.

² Marees, Pieter. Description et recit Historial dy Riche Royavme d'or de Gvnea. Amsterdam, 1605.

³ Müller, Wilhelm Johann. Die Africanische auf der Guineischen Gold-Cust gelegene Landschaft Fetu. Hamburg, 1676.

⁴ Gröben, Otto Friedrich von der. Guineische Reise-Beschreibung. Marienwerder, 1694.

⁵ Froger, Francois. Relation d'un Voyage. Paris, 1698.

⁶ Lopes, Odoardo. Relatione del Reame die Congo et delle Circonvicine Contreade. Roma, 1591.

⁷ Dapper, Oliver. Umständliche und eigentliche Beschreibung von Africa. Amsterdam, 1670.

⁸ Cavazzi, Giovanni Antonio. Istoria Descrione de 'tre' Regni Congo, Matamba et Angola. Bologna, 1687.

⁹ Merolla, Girolamo. Breve, e succinta Relazione del Viaggio nel regno die Congo nell' Africa Meridionale. Napoli, 1692.

¹⁰ Marees, Pieter (De Bry). Warhaftige Historische Beschreibung dess gewaltigen Goltreichen Königreichs Guinea. Frankfurt a.M., 1603.



Fig. 1

They are probably bell-like instruments as are in common use in the Gold Coast to the present day.

Wilhelm Johann Müller (1676) born in Harburg, was the preacher of the Danish African Company in Fetu, Gold Coast, from 1661 to 1669, and lived in the Danish fort of Friedrichsburg (near Cabo Corso). The book contains several engravings on copper, mostly of ethnographic content, but which — like those of De Bry — must be numbered among the so-called 'fancies', without thereby lessening the total value of the book, which doubtless belongs among the most interesting sources of trade and missionary history of the 17th century. According to Müller's report, many courtiers, women and servants surround the king. Whenever the king drank, drums were beaten, elephant horns were blown and muskets fired. Besides his drummers the king had other musicians, who had to be ready day and night in the king's court to blow large and small elephant horns and make music on bells, which were usually struck with a stick by female slaves. On page 100 of his work Müller gives an etching in which a drummer and several horn blowers are to be seen, but these drawings are—as mentioned above—of no ethnographic source value.

Otto Friedrich von der Gröben (1694) was born in 1657, the son of Colonel Friedrich Otto von der Gröben, in Pratten (Ermeland, formerly Germany) and was raised by the Jesuits. Already in early youth Gröben saw many European countries and travelled as far as Palestine and Egypt. He became Gentleman of the Bedchamber at the Brandenburg court, and in 1682 was given command, as a major, of two frigates, to find a suitable place to found a Brandenburg colony in Africa under orders of the Great Elector. He succeeded in this at Cape "Tres Puntas" (Three Points) on the Gold Coast (Ghana). Some clues, for instance certain details in the pictures (not, however, mentioned in the

text) indicate that the illustrations added to the book were done from the author's own sketches. Unfortunately the exact placing and identification of the illustrations is not possible. Von der Gröben says: "At new moon the inhabitants of the Pepper Coast (= Liberia) sing, dance and play with a stick on a three foot high drum carved out of palmwood and covered with skin. In one hand they hold the drumstick, in the other a bell, and on the arms they have iron rings — all this together produces harmonic music in their opinion, and they dance until they collapse with fatigue"¹¹.



Fig. 2

Of course the illustration on page 34 belonging to this text (Fig. 2) shows only little of this, unless we regard the rack supported on four posts as a musical instrument, perhaps a xylophone.

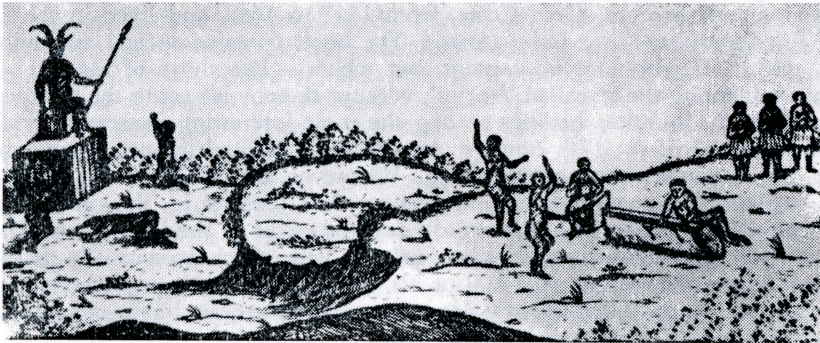


Fig. 3

Better for our purpose is the illustration on page 90 (Fig. 3), in which we can distinctly recognise a wooden slit drum. The relevant text says: "The kingdom of Ardra or Arder, whose inhabitants have lapsed into devil worship, borders on the Gold Coast. He (the devil) is consulted in all undertakings like an oracle; people bring him offerings on feast days and dance and jump to the rhythm of a wooden drum" (slit drum)¹².

¹¹ MONUMENTA ETHNOGRAPHICA, p. + 51.

¹² *Ibid.*

As the fourth author to whom we owe illustrations of early West African musical instruments we have the Frenchman François Froger (1698). He landed with his company on July 3rd, 1695, at Cape Verde, approximately two miles off the island of Gorée, and on July 22nd of the same year he entered the Gambia. Froger made numerous drawings and plans of the places and coasts he visited, their inhabitants animals and vegetation, which were etched by C. Inselin and illustrated his travel account "Relation d'un Voyage", Paris, 1698. The etchings were based on personal notes and sketches, as with the Frenchman Le Maire, and we may therefore take it that the author was able to exercise some control over the etchings before printing.

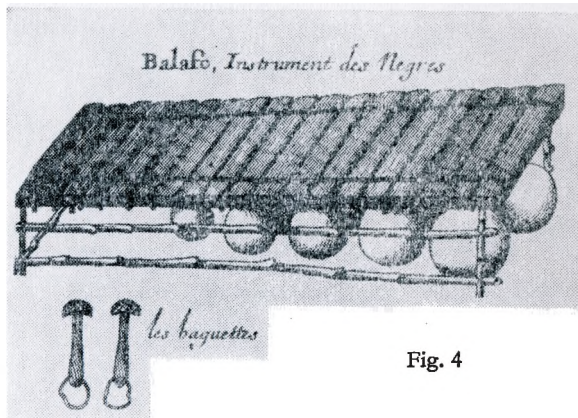


Fig. 4

On page 46 of his work Froger shows a xylophone with sticks (Fig. 4), and gives the following description: "A certain number of very hard little wooden boards are laid next to one another according to size, held together by a thin leather lace. This lace also goes through the small sticks which are placed between each board to keep them at a certain distance from one another. This instrument resembles the xylophone which we also use, but the negroes fasten ten or twelve calabashes under the boards, whose various sizes bring out different sounds. These boards are beaten with a stick, whose head is covered with leather to make the sounds softer"¹³. In another picture (Fig. 5) we see, besides other important details, a *balafon* player, that is a xylophone player, in his house, and the text says that most of the inhabitants spend their time interpreting the Koran or playing an instrument called *balafon*.

If we survey the source value of the illustrations in the four authors mentioned, we may say that those of Wilhelm Johann Müller cannot withstand critical analysis and appear to be "fancies". This is evident for example, from the fact that the horns pictured are end-blown and not side-blown as is common with horns of ivory or other material used by West Africans. As a rule, horns from Negro Africa have their mouthpiece on the convex side. This can be seen distinctly in the illustration of Pieter de Marees and in this case, too, this traveller proves to be a reliable source, perhaps the best one we have for West Africa at that time. Compared with Pieter de Marees and W. J. Müller, the pictures of Otto Friedrich von der Gröben must be labelled primitive and unskilful. Nevertheless their ethnographic value is not insignificant. Whether or not we are dealing with a xylophone with gourd resonators in the case of the object by the side of the pole with the impaled head, we can recognise without trouble a wooden slit-drum in the second picture.

¹³ *Ibid.*



Fig. 5

The illustrations of François Froger are of great source value. This applies to his illustration of a xylophone (*balaf*), including sticks, from the Senegal area.

Before we turn to the second part of this work we should like to commemorate the compiler genius Oliver Dapper (1670). Little is known about his life. He lived and acted as an independent scholar in Amsterdam, where his famous work "Naukeurige Beschrijvinghe der Afrikansche gewestern" was published in 1668. Dapper contributed considerably to the ethnology of his time with his collection and revision of Portuguese, English and of course, Dutch accounts. Though he may have occasionally allowed a few errors or even bigger mistakes to have crept into his work, the great value of his descriptions remains undisputed. Dapper also gives a great number of illustrations in his work whose ethnographic source value must be considered very small. The mere fact that Dapper had never visited Africa himself puts his pictures in an unfavourable light. The illustrations, drawn by European artists and then engraved on copper, are based mostly, in their themes and ethnographic details, on text models, as given to the artists by Dapper, or else they are taken in part from older pictures, such as those of Odoardo Lopez. The historical value for that period of such illustrations should not be contested, but they are not primary ethnographic or ethnohistorical sources.



Fig. 6

On page 355 of the German edition Dapper shows, *inter alia*, “The burial of a drummer in the country of the Jalofer” (Fig. 6). The text says: “Drummers and members of their families, being a despised caste, are buried in a hollow tree (tree burial), otherwise the earth would no longer bear fruit. Neither must they be thrown into the sea or a river, or the fish would suffer.

At court (king and noblemen) the drummers are highly regarded as musicians, and in war they march with their drums in front of the king. Nevertheless they must not enter the king’s sleeping room, and if perhaps a courtier has had an affair with a drummer’s wife or daughter, he may never again appear before the king’s eyes. The drummers belong to a despised caste and live mainly on begging. The drums, which are four to five feet long, are carved out of a trunk, hollowed out first; they are open at the bottom and covered with a goat skin on top” (p. 355 f.)¹⁴.

Central Africa: the sources.

For the area of Central Africa or Congo-Angola the following authors are relevant: Odoardo Lopez (1591)¹⁵, Oliver Dapper (1670)¹⁶, Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi (1687)¹⁷, and Girolamo Merolla (1692)¹⁸.

¹⁴ *Id.* p. + 23.

¹⁵ See footnote 6.

¹⁶ See footnote 7.

¹⁷ See footnote 8.

¹⁸ See footnote 9.

The first pictorial documents from the whole Congo-Angola area we owe to Odoardo Lopez (1591). Born in Benevento near Lisbon, he travelled on one of his cousin's trading ships in April, 1578 to Loanda (Luanda). At that time the port was still independent, as was the whole kingdom of Congo. It was only during his stay, which lasted ten years, that the Portuguese settled at some places along the coast. Lopez thus was able to gain a thorough knowledge over many years, not only of the kingdom of Congo, which stretched from Gabon to the Kunene River and fairly far into the interior, but also with the help of native information, of large parts of West, South, Central and East Africa. His handwritten notes, illustrated by drawings of natives, of a zebra, of plants, and by a map of the Congo kingdom, he left to the Italian Filippo Pigafetta, who translated into Italian the account of the author, with the help of his verbal explanation and amplification, and had it printed in Rome in 1591, with etched reproductions, under the title "Relazione del Reame di Congo"¹⁹.



Fig. 7

In plate No. 4 of this work (Fig. 7), Lopez shows the "Soldier's Dress" and remarks in the text that in war the army of the Congo kingdom (*Mociconghi*) and the inhabitants of Angola were divided into small fighting groups, which were under the leadership of a colonel. Commands were passed on by means of shawm-like and bell-like instruments as well as ivory horns; also these instruments were carried into battle in front of the combatants.

Oliver Dapper (1670) must certainly have read Lopez and used his book as a source. In his work "Umbtändliche und Eigentliche Beschreibung von Africa" Dapper

¹⁹ *Id.* p. + 7, + 8.

gives²⁰ on page 525 an illustration of the “Court ceremonies in Loango”*. With it we read the following text about the music of the court: “For instruments they use large and small horns of ivory, wooden drums of varying sizes hollowed out of trunks, which are beaten with the flat hand or with sticks, and also a drum resembling a tambourine.

“These instruments serve to accompany the dance of the noblemen which is called *chilomba*. With long running steps the dancer moves backwards and forwards two or three times successively, moving his arms up and down. The dancer then claps his hands very loudly two or three times in front of the king, and the other noblemen quietly repeat this clapping. The dancer hereupon flings himself to the ground in front of the king, and rolls around in the dust two or three times to show his subservience; after the dance some run straight up to the king and lay their hands on his knees and their head on his lap. The highest and most distinguished dignitaries have their own places near the king. In honour of these dignitaries their subjects also perform complimentary dances.

“Beside the splendid carpet of state stand two, three or even four speakers with strange iron instruments in their hands. These instruments are not unlike sheep bells, but they come to a point at the bottom, whereas on top they are broad and thick. They are one ell or less long and are sounded with a stick to call the people to silence and attention. It is also the speakers’ task to proclaim the king’s orders and to announce ‘Losses and Finds’ ”²¹. If we compare the text with the picture belonging to it we must admit that

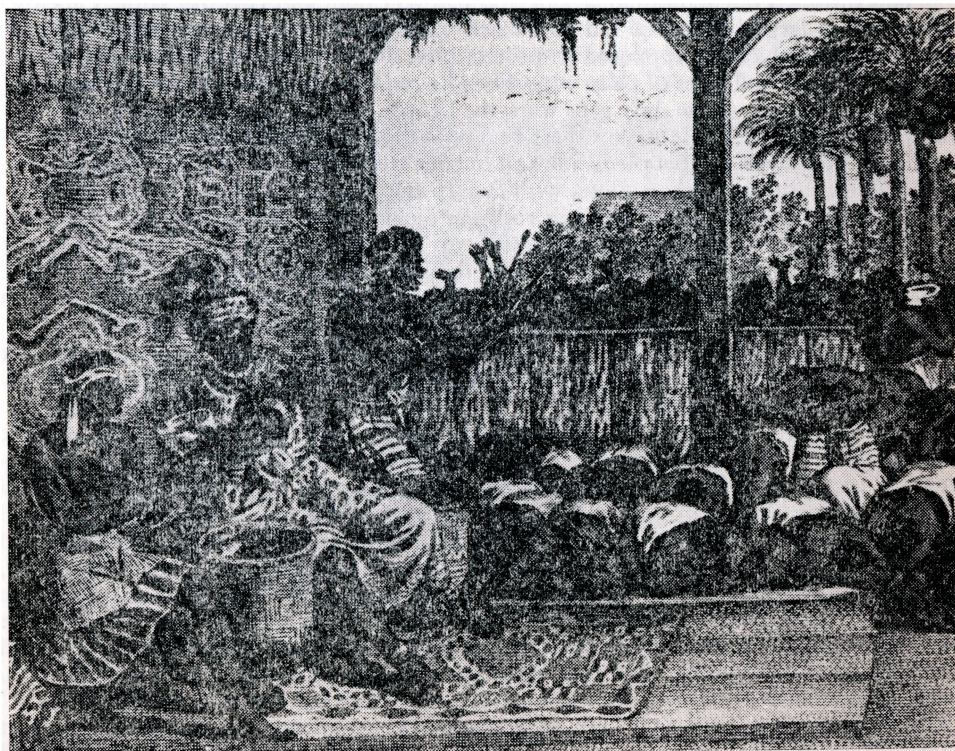


Fig. 8

²⁰ *Id.* p. + 29.

* Unfortunately we were not able to reproduce this picture.—Ed.

²¹ *Ibid.*

the speakers are using simple iron(?) rods, instead of the "sheep bell instruments" just as in the previous illustration "The King of Loango's Winehouse" (Fig. 8). About this we read: "The king has to observe specific eating and drinking regulations. Although he has a great many houses at his disposal, for eating and drinking he may only use the food and wine house. The king eats twice a day, the first time in the morning around 10 o'clock. The dishes are served in covered baskets. A man goes in front with a big bell which he jingles. This is to show that the king's meal is being carried to the eating house. The king comes immediately to eat, and as soon as he appears, the food bearers and also the steward and the cook retire. Nobody must see the king eat, whether man or beast, unless he wants to lose his life. Therefore the king always eats with the doors closed.

"After the meal the king, and many noblemen, officials and also common people, proceed to the winehouse. This is the most magnificent building of the whole palace. The square where the winehouse stands is surrounded by a palm fence, and it is here that even the most serious quarrels are settled in the king's presence. The house is open at the gable end. About 20 feet from the back the room is divided by an eight foot high cross wall. Behind this wall the king's wine stock is kept; it cannot be seen by the people. Many delicate 'Küssenblätter', which they call Kumbel, hang over the wall. Next to the wall is an imperial chair or throne made of white and black palm ridges (palm ribs and woven palm leaves) artfully plaited together, similar to their way of weaving baskets which are occasionally brought to Europe.

"This throne is one fathom long, one and half feet high and two feet wide. On either side are two large baskets of red and black wickerwork in which the king keeps his magic objects which are supposed to protect him. The cup bearer sits on one side, and passes the king a full glass of palm wine when he requires to drink. On the left-hand side sits another person whose duty is to warn the people. In each hand he holds a thick iron rod pointed at the top. He strikes these two rods together as a sign that the king wishes to drink. As soon as the people inside and outside the winehouse hear this warning they immediately fling themselves down with face to the ground and dare not look up. They remain in this position until the iron rods are again beaten, when they know that the king has finished drinking. Meanwhile the cup bearer has taken back the goblet with his eyes closed and his back turned towards the king. As soon as this has happened and everyone has got up off the ground, they all clap their hands as if they wanted to wish the king good health. Clapping is an act of politeness and a sign of respect"²².

As mentioned above, the illustrations by Dapper have only little ethnographic value. This is confirmed by the fact that the horns shown in the illustrations are end-blown, in a very un-African way.

In contrast to these the illustrations by Cavazzi have an excellent ethnographic source value. Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi (1687)⁵, a Capuchin monk, born in Montecuccolo in the dukedom of Modena, went as a missionary in 1654 from Genoa, via Cadiz and Tenerife, to Angola. He lived there and in the adjoining countries for 13 years, and gained a thorough knowledge of them in his wide journeyings. He delivered his notes, which also reported the activities of other Capuchins in the Congo since 1640, to P. Fortunato Alamandini, who edited them under the title "Istorica Descrizione de 'Tre' Regni Congo, Matamba et Angola" in Bologna, 1687, fol. (Milano, 1690, 4). The etchings added to the work probably go back for the most part to drawings by Cavazzi or other missionaries, but they also show the influence of Lopez to a certain extent. This appears distinctly in the illustration "Warriors Play the Bell and the Double-bell" (p. 157) (Fig. 9) and yet this very picture gives us completely new aspects. The text says: "Without previous consultation and even for bad reasons, wars are started and then ended again within a few hours. As the orders of the king are quickly passed on,

²² *Id.* p. 28 f.



Fig. 9

and the warriors are unhampered by provisions or equipment, they appear armed at the meeting place within a day, and march against the enemy without waiting for further orders, with much shouting and the noise of their musical instruments"²³. Cavazzi's reports on dance and music are very detailed, pictorially as well as textually (Fig. 10): "Dance, among the barbarous, does not have the task of showing the grace and flexibility of the body, as with us, but serves particularly to satisfy their adulterous lusts. In the same way their music is no feast for the ears. On festive occasions noble



Fig. 10

²³ *Id.* p. + 40.

persons blow the *apungu*, an instrument made of wood and carved ivory, similar to pipes and flutes. It was brought to the Congo by the Portuguese.

“Another very shrill and piercing instrument is made of a goat horn, and serves mostly as a signal instrument. The *asambi* resembles a Spanish lute and is strung with palm-bark strings. *Longa*, a double bell, is struck with a small wooden beater, and is carried at the front in war, especially by noblemen and their servants. *Agamba* or *ingomba* consists, like a drum, of a piece of hollowed-out trunk and is beaten with the fists. The drummers act quite possessed, as if taken by madness. A smaller instrument than the former is the *adunga*, which is beaten with a round, heavy piece of wood. The king and provincial administrator, on their public appearances, use a small drum bound with iron hoops and covered with skin on one side. Their most entertaining instrument however is the *marimba*, consisting of fourteen or sixteen calabashes arranged in a row. On top of each calabash a small board, two inches wide and a span long, is fastened, and a player sounds it with his fingers or a wooden stick”²⁴.

The last author in our account of early ethnographic pictorial sources is Girolamo Merolla (1692). He was, like Cavazzi, a Capuchin monk and missionary, and came from Sorrento. He set off with some companions on May 5th, 1682, from Naples for Loanda (Luanda, Angola), which they finally reached at the beginning of May, 1683 after numerous stops on the way. After a short stay the missionaries went to the mouth of the Zaire (Congo), and sailed upstream to the town of Sogno, the mission headquarters in this region and the residence of a native count. Here Merolla stayed for some five years; afterwards he went to Cabinda in the kingdom of Angoy; in March, 1688 via Boma to the kingdom of Congo and its ruler, who at that time resided in Lemba. Because of illness Merolla finally travelled via Sogno to Loanda, whence he returned by ship to Genoa via Bahia, where he stayed for a fairly long time, and Lisbon. Of the 12 illustrations in Merolla’s work seven must be considered to a large extent similar to those of Cavazzi, so that their primary source value is diminished. It is the same with the illustration of the musical instruments on page 171, which reminds us partly of Cavazzi’s corresponding illustration, nevertheless it also shows completely new aspects like the *epugu*- (*embuchi*-) and the *marimba* player. For this reason alone it would not be advisable to consider Merolla a secondary or unreliable pictorial source. With the text we have the same situation. Besides repetitions relying on Cavazzi, which can also be taken as a confirmation of his accounts, we find sufficient original material to call Merolla an independent observer and reporter. We read in the explanatory text to his illustration “Musical Instruments” (Fig. 11): “They have an instrument they call *embuchi* and value highly, which only a king, prince or person of royal blood may have. It consists of ivory pipes of arm’s length, which are blown by four to six players. Sometimes they also add a bagpipe as a soprano voice. Many instruments, e.g. the *longa*, are two simple iron bells joined together by an arc and beaten with a stick. One or another of the instruments is carried before a prince and played either solo or in conjunction with an orchestra. One of the most common instruments is the *marimba*. Sixteen calabashes act as resonators and are supported lengthwise by two bars. Above the calabashes little boards of red wood, somewhat longer than a span, are placed, called *taculla*. The instrument is hung round the neck and the boards (keys) are beaten with small sticks. Mostly four *marimbas* are played together; if six want to play, the *cassuto* is added—a hollowed piece of wood four spans long, with ridges in it. The bass of this orchestra is the *quilondo*, a roomy, big-bellied instrument two and a half to three spans in height which looks like a bottle towards the end and is rubbed in the same way as the *cassuto*. When all the instruments are played together, a truly harmonic effect is produced from a distance; nearby one can hear the

²⁴ *Ibid.*

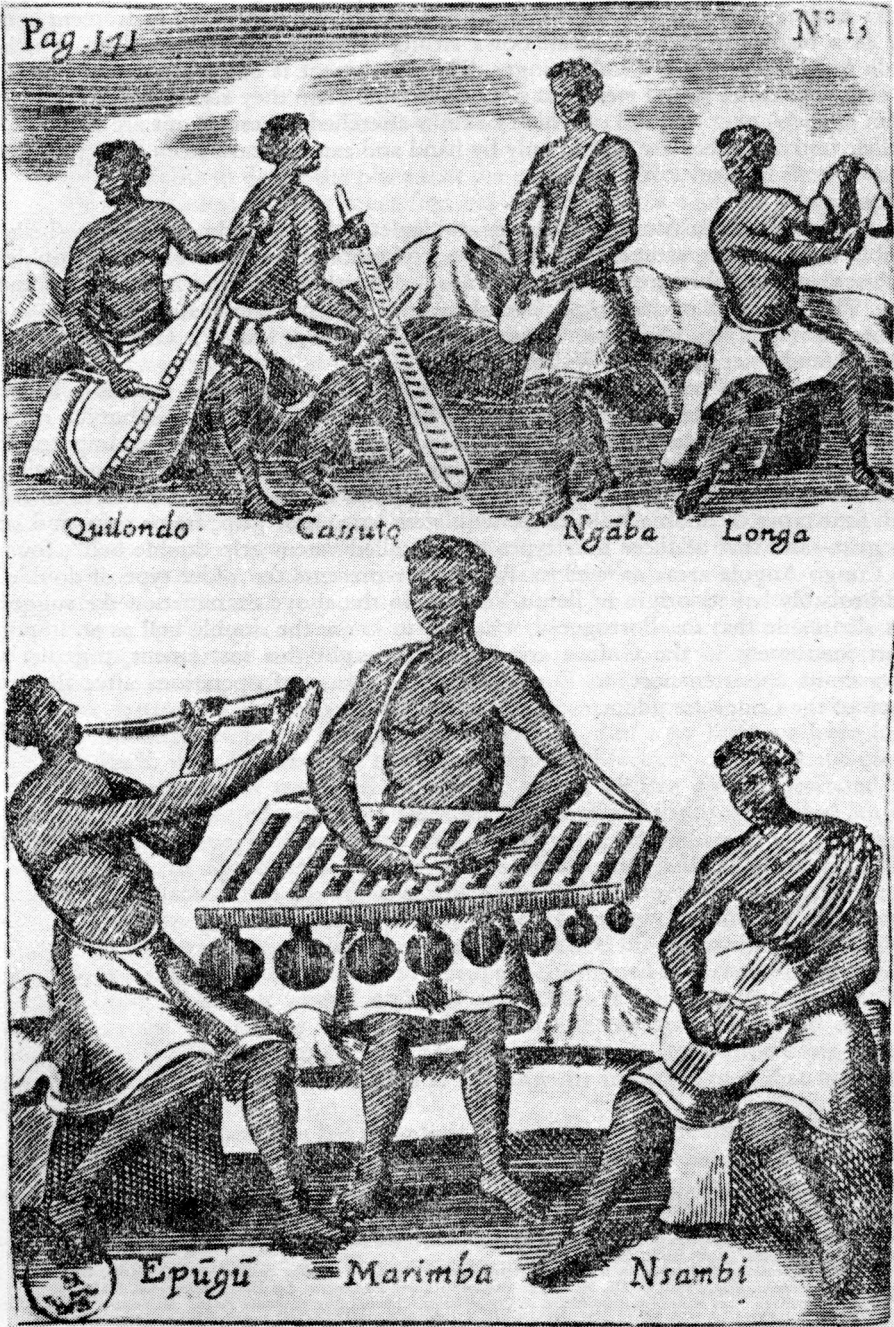


Fig. 11

sticks rattling, which causes a great noise. The *nsambi** is a stringed instrument consisting of a resonator and five small bows strung with strings of bark fibre, which are made to vibrate with the index finger. The instrument is supported on the chest for playing. The notes sound weak but not unpleasant. Then they also have a large wooden drum (*ngamba*) over one end of which a skin is stretched. These drums are usually found at their festivals. They are beaten only by hand and can be heard from far" (p. 170 ff.)²⁵.

Summary

Among the various musical instruments depicted in the early documents (bells and double bells, drums, scrapers, horns, flutes, xylophones and bow-lute) the double bell deserves our special interest not least because of its relatively good pictorial documentation. The question of its origin has already occupied several authors, such as Leo Frobenius (1909)²⁶, Hermann Baumann (1927, 1940, 1967)²⁷, Gaston van Bulck (1948)²⁸, and recently, James Walton (1955)²⁹.

In Cavazzi (1687) we see mentioned in print for the first time a double bell from the Congo—Angola area, and named *longa* as in Merolla. The Mbundu of Caluquembe call the double bell *alunga* (sing. *elunga*) even today, and give it an important role in the enthronement of the king³⁰. A comparative examination³¹ of the early pictorial sources considered in this article and of later reports has shown that we have to reckon with four types of double bell—those with stem grip, bow grip, frame grip, and lateral bar grip—and that of these four types the so-called "stem grip double bell", found in the Congo-Angola areas as well as Rhodesia represents the older type of double bell and probably has its origin in Benin-Yoruba. In the above examination the suggestion was also made that the Portuguese, who got to know the double bell as an important court instrument in the Guinea area, finally brought this instrument, together with other court appurtenances, to Luanda, their new base of operations after the breakdown of the Congo kingdom.

* It is interesting to note Merolla's superior accuracy in spelling African words in contrast to Cavazzi's '*asambi*'. Merolla apparently liked African music, while Cavazzi did not, and he can therefore be given more credence.—Ed.

²⁵ *Id.* p. + 49.

²⁶ Frobenius, Leo. *Ethnologische Ergebnisse der zweiten Reiseperiode der Deutschen Innerafrikanischen Forschungsexpedition. Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, Jg. 41, Berlin, 1909, p. 782 f.

²⁷ Baumann, Hermann. *Die materielle Kultur der Azande und Mangbetu. Baessler Archiv*, Vol. XI, Berlin, 1927, p. 66. *Idem: Völkerkunde von Afrika*, Essen, 1940, p. 276, 59. *Idem: Preface to Alfred Hauenstein, Les Hanya*, Wiesbaden, 1967.

²⁸ Bulck, Gastonvan. *Les recherches linguistiques au Congo Belge. Institut Royal Colonial Belge. Memoires*, Vol. 16, Bruxelles, 1948, p. 445.

²⁹ Walton, James. *Iron Gongs from the Congo. Man*, Vol. 56, No. 20, 1956.

³⁰ Hauenstein, Alfred. *L-Ombala de Caluquembe. Anthropos*, Vol. 58, 1963, p. 81 f. *Idem: Les Hanya*, Wiesbaden, 1967, p. 237.

³¹ Hirschberg, Walter. *Beitrag zur Geschichte der Doppelglocke im Kongoraum. Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien*, Vol. 99, Wien, 1969 (*in preparation*).