

## MUSICAL BOWS IN SOUTH-WESTERN ANGOLA, 1965

by

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Musical bows are frequently seen in south-western Angola among populations which speak Humbi, Handa and related languages. During a week's stay in the area of Quilengues and Dinde, northeast of Sá da Bandeira, in 1965, I was able to collect some data on bows and make tape recordings and 8 mm. shots of some of their varieties.

### Area Characteristics

The people settled in south-western Angola mostly have a mixed economy based on animal husbandry (cattle) and agriculture. In 1965 women in particular were almost exclusively seen in traditional clothing and hair-style, using *olukula*, a red dye-stuff, and beads.

This south-western culture area stretches as far as the Kuvangu (Cubango, Okavango) river in the east, and to the south into parts of Namibia. Music and dance are distinct stylistically from the rest of Angola, compared with the Lunda/Chokwe music in the east or with the Kongo musical culture in the north. In some of its manifestations it reminds the observer of Hima/Tutsi influenced regions in Ruanda, Burundi, south-western Uganda and parts of western Tanzania, especially as far as choral singing is concerned.

Vocal style and motional patterns are often rather divergent from what is known in west-central African music. This is obvious as far as the Herero and Ambo are concerned, but it is also apparent in much Humbi and Handa music, for example in such Humbi men's dances as *chitita*. It is not easy to account for this historically, due to the lack of sources about migration and culture contact in earlier centuries. The collection and evaluation of oral traditions is also in the initial stage here.

A further characteristic of this south-western area is a high degree of cultural fragmentation. In music several types of multi-part singing, for instance, coexist even in the same village. Songs for the eight-string *chihumba* (bow-lute) are usually hexatonic and performed in the parallel thirds which are a common trait in much of Angolan music. On the other hand, dance songs such as *chitita* display a pentatonic harmonic system.

Some of the songs and dances are accompanied with drums or hand-clapping. These are the names of the principal dances among Humbi and Handa speaking people: *nkili*, *mbanda*, *vinjomba*, *machikuma*, *mbulunganga* and *kaunjangerá*. *Nkili* was a very popular dance in 1965 and possibly still is. It has characteristic configurations: women clapping their hands stand in line, one woman dances out of the group and receives turn by turn several young men who dance towards her with high jumping movements. Each episode ends with the dancing woman lifting the man high up above her shoulders and head.

In the 17th and 18th centuries south-western Angola was an important recruitment area for the deportation of slave workers to the New World, mainly to Brazil

and Cuba. According to some oral traditions of the Humbi these raids severely depopulated the south-west.

Along with the deportation of a substantial number of people also went the knowledge of musical instruments from western and south-western Angola. These instruments and even their Angolan names are still known in some parts of Latin America today. One example is the *mbulumbumba* gourd-resonated bow which I find in Fernando Ortiz under the spelling "burumbumba". Playing techniques appear to have changed over the centuries, however, in Cuba and in Angola, if one compares Ortiz's illustration (p. 21 of his book *Los instrumentos de la musica afro-cubana*, Vol. V, Habana 1952) with the Angolan bows described in this article.

The musical instruments used by the Humbi and Handa are drums, such as *ng'oma* and *chikenjengo*, including the *pwita* (friction drum), gourd rattles, percussion sticks and the *lumpoku* (bullroarer) in boys' circumcision schools, and a great variety of chordophones. Lamellophones are known as *esanji* or *chisanzi*. I recorded a board-type variety with a gourd resonator, sixteen notes fine-tuned with beeswax.

The bow-lute (pluriarc) was the most popular instrument in villages near Dinde and Quilengues in 1965. It was always played with the bows pointing away from the musician's body.

Among the musical bows I recorded the following types:

1. *mbulumbumba* (a gourd-resonated bow)
2. *sagaya* (a braced mouth bow with the string-bearer held between the lips)
3. *ohonji* (a braced mouth bow where the end of the string bearer is pushed into the mouth against the inside of the musician's right cheek)

All the recordings discussed below are stored in the Phonogram Archive of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna. I will refer to the items by their archive numbers which appear in the catalogues of the Archive. Some portions of my recordings in south-western Angola, including samples of the three bow types found appeared on a record called *Humbi en Handa - Angola*, published by the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, in 1973 (reviewed here on p.153).

#### Descriptive notes on the bow recordings (in chronological order)

B 10095a – Song performed instrumentally on the *mbulumbumba* by Chapinga, m., c. 30 years old, ethnic group Chipongo. The Chipongo are a group related to the Humbi and Handa. They are mainly settled north of Vila Paiva Couceiro. In ethnographic literature they are also found under the names "Chipungu" or "Quipungo". The musician Chapinga was apparently a stranger to the place where I recorded him. At Munengole village, near the administrative post of Dinde, 15th July.

B 10095b – Another instrumental song performed by Chapinga. Title: "*Mucaí muua*" (Beautiful woman). An extract of this song appears on the record mentioned, item B/5.

Chapinga's musical bow was c. 1 m. long. The stick was c. 2 cm. thick, made of a very light coloured wood. A calabash resonator was attached in the right-hand quarter of the bow, from the musician's point of view. The attachment loop, or brace, passes around the string and the stick and is knotted on the inside of the calabash, which then presses onto the stick (Photo 1).

The musician holds a small stick, c. 30 cm. long, in his right hand, and the left hand holds the bow. The bow stick lies in the palm, held by the middle and ring

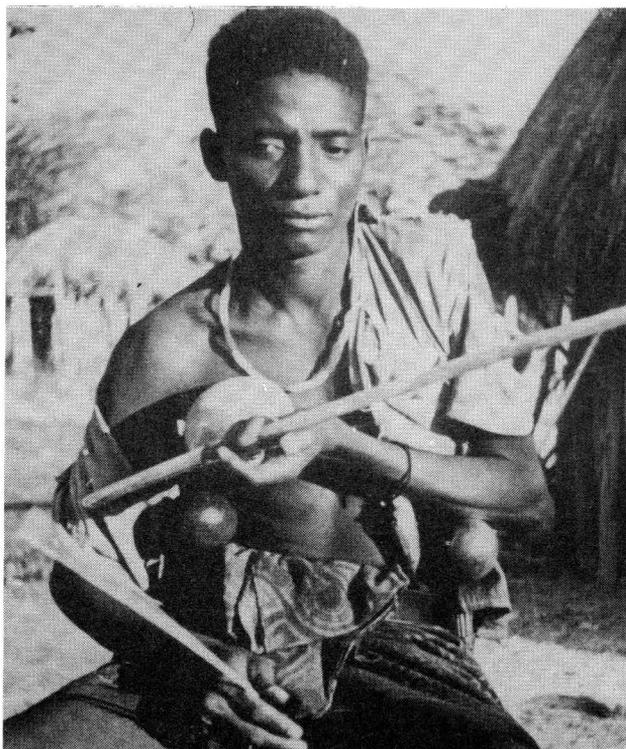


Photo 1. Chapinga playing the *mbulumbumba*. Munengole, 15th July. Reproduced from colour slide F 104.

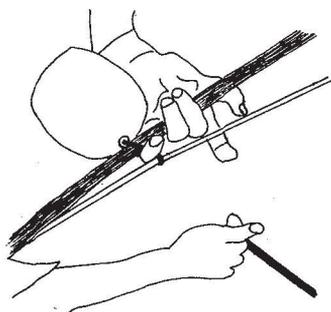


Fig. 1. From colour slide F 105.

fingers (Fig. 1). The little finger is hooked round the brace, strengthening its pull by pulling it a little to the left. Thus the back of the resonating calabash is pulled hard up against the bow stick. The index finger is free to stop the string. It does this with a hooking movement. The inside of the second joint pulls the string towards the bow stick and the string is thus pressed towards the outstretched tip of the thumb, which shortens the string and thus raises its pitch (Fig. 2).

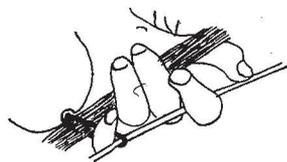


Fig. 2. From cine film X.2.

Thus the musician gets the two fundamental notes, which are about a whole tone apart. For the deeper note the string vibrates between the far end of the bow and the calabash brace on which the little finger is pulling. For the higher note the string vibrates only as far as the thumb, which stops it like a 'bridge'.

The opening of the calabash is held towards the right side of the chest, barely touching it. By very slightly altering the distance from the chest, the musician can

intentionally amplify certain partials while he plays. A secondary, barely audible melody arises over the two-note bass.

In the present case, the range of partials is narrowly restricted. The fourth partial is still audible in the recording but not the higher ones. In order to be able to control this 'off-on' action with the calabash, the musician always plays with a bare chest.

Although the bow player does not sing, this is by no means to be considered as 'instrumental' music, a concept which is not applicable to the musical culture of south-west Angola, for the bow song suggests words. In the second piece the implied text refers to a beautiful woman.

Similarly to many other musical bow players in this district Chapinga produces rasping noises with his throat and larynx during the second piece (in the first piece he was still shy). These form a motional pattern that goes along in conformity with the musical bow. In the second piece the musician suddenly interrupts his playing but starts again immediately.



Photo 2. Playing technique and position of the *sagaya*. Musician, "Pequenino", at Kalova, 15th July. Reproduced from colour slide F 99.

B 10096 and B 10097 – Two tunes played on the *sagaya* (one of the two types of mouth bow found in this area). Musician "Pequenino", m., aged 38, ethnic group Humbi, at Kalova, near Dinde, 15th July. The first item appears on the record, item B/6.

The bow stick is of hard wood a little more than 1 m. long. The string, evidently of twisted skin, is fixed onto the end of the stick by wrapping and tying. The string is divided near the middle by a brace which is tied round the back of the bow stick. This division of the bow gives two fundamental notes from the two unequal lengths of string; they are about a whole tone apart.

For playing, the right hand holds a leather wand of about 30 cm. and the left hand holds the bow as shown in Fig. 3. The thumb is at the back of the bow stick; the ring and little fingers press in the opposite direction. The brace is held by the middle and index fingers in a scissor grip; the middle finger presses from below on the brace while the index finger, which is free to move, only presses from time to time from above onto the upper part of the brace (Fig. 3).

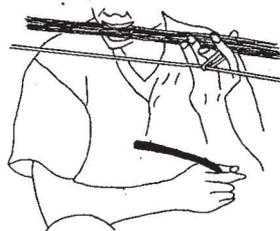
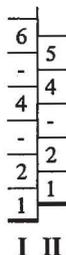


Fig. 3. From slide F 100.

The bow stick is held in the lips (not with the teeth). While the musician plays one or other segment of the string he continually alters the shape and size of his mouth cavity, so that certain partials are amplified. One can see in an 8 mm. film shot (X.2. in my collection) that the upper lip, in this technique, stays relatively firmly on the bow stick, but the lower lip is allowed to move fairly freely, as if he were speaking. The chin also moves.

The melody formed by the partials implies a text, although the musician does not sing. In the formation of this melody he uses the following range of partials (Fig. 4):



I II

6 5 4 4

I II II I

Fig. 4. Structure of harmonics.

Melodic pattern obtained.

This musician also produced various noises with his throat while playing.

B 10157 — Song performed on the *ohonji* by Chief Arturo Branco, m. aged c. 30, ethnic group Handa, at Mambondwe (south of Quilengues), 23rd July. This song appears on the record, item B/3.

The instrument is a hunting bow. A brace divides the string near the middle into two not quite equal parts. The one end of the bow stick is put into the mouth which functions as a resonator. It presses fairly tightly against the inside of the musician's right cheek.

The musician holds this bow, which is somewhat more than 1 m. long, obliquely in front of him, the free end of the bow stick pointing down to the left. In this way the left hand can comfortably hold the bow stick near the middle. The bow is positioned so that the string is above and the stick below.

The musician plays with elbow bent, holding a stick in his right hand, with which he strikes the respective part of the string with a movement towards his body (Fig. 5).

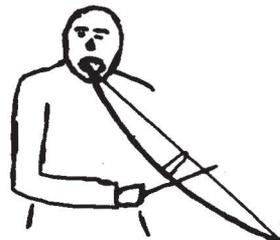


Fig. 5. From a field sketch.

This type of attitude in holding a mouth bow is also known to me in Angola

from the !Kung'. There, too, a normal hunting bow is used. (cf. photos 3–6 in my book *Música Tradicional e Aculturada dos !Kung' de Angola*, Lisbon, 1970). By altering the resonating cavity of his mouth the musician amplifies certain partials at will. The *ohonji* bow is tuned very low. The delicate melody of the partials sounds above the two bass notes. These fundamental notes are a whole tone apart as, in fact, are those of all the bows I recorded in south-west Angola.

Arturo Branco used a fairly wide spectrum of partials. Up to the sixth partial of each part of the string was used acoustically. In the lower fundamental note, however, the fifth partial did not stand out and was seldom used melodically.

The result gives hexatonic melodic material, with a structure similar to that in the tuning of the *chihumba* bow-lute. It struck me particularly that the absolute pitch of the basic note of this musical bow was the same as that of the bow-lute which Arturo Branco himself played immediately after the musical bow recording (cf. recording B 10159, Mambondwe, 23rd July). It is clear that according to his conception, his musical bow and his bow-lute should have the same tuning.

The tuning system of the bow-lute among the Humbi and the Handa is characterised by the typical number of eight strings and by hexatonic tuning (with two notes doubled at the octave). Although on the *chihumba* there is a tendency to equalise the interval size of the thirds (i.e. to temper them) there is also a relationship with the bow harmony resulting from partials.

Arturo Branco's *ohonji* produced hexatonic melodies with two octave doublings (as on the *chihumba*), from the sixth, fifth, fourth and third partials of both parts of the string.

While playing the musical bow Branco made growling and rasping noises by drawing the breath regularly in and out. It reminded me much of a *pwita* friction drum. He also coughed and puffed occasionally while playing. These techniques appear to be an important characteristic in the bow style of this part of west central Africa.

B 10158 – The same musical bow, now played by Bengera Korea, m. aged c. 30.

Korea was present while chief Branco was being recorded. He asked for the instrument as he wanted to try a piece too.

This musician played with the same technique and in the same attitude as the previous player. He also made the growling sounds. He was apparently less in practice than the chief.

B 10165 – Song with *mbulumbumba* musical bow with calabash resonator, sung and played by José Emanuel Virasanda, m. aged c. 18 years. This musician was working at the time on a Portuguese potato farm, which employed numerous migrant labourers from the surrounding areas, also several Khoisan people (!Kong') (local pronunciation). Ethnic group Handa. Song title: "*Chirumba chetu*". At Mukondo, near Mambondwe, south of Quilengues, 24th July.

The bow was relatively short, not longer than about 70 cm. A small calabash was attached fairly loosely by means of a brace onto the bow stick and string. Only the longer section of the string was played. At the end of the short section a small piece of charcoal was inserted between stick and string to keep the latter away from the stick (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. From a field sketch.

For the rest the instrument was much like the *mbulumbumba* of Chapinga (cf. B 10095 and photo 1) but a little smaller.

The left hand holds the bow stick in a way characteristic of the *mbulumbumba*. The middle and ring fingers clasp the stick from below, left of the calabash from the musician's point of view, at the point of balance of the instrument. The opening of the calabash is brought very near the chest, and the little finger of the left hand presses on the brace to make certain it pulls tight on both the string and the calabash.

The index finger of the left hand stops the string by hooking around it; as with Chapinga the string then presses against the extended thumb. In rest position the index finger extends forward under the string. The two fundamental notes were also a whole tone apart here.

A thinner stick about 30 cm. long serves to strike the string. The opening of the calabash is held on the right side of the chest. Particularly during the relatively longer notes, Virasanda altered the position of the calabash on his chest very slightly and amplified certain partials to obtain an oscillating timbre – a kind of wow effect.

Virasanda mostly alternated playing and singing such that the musical bow was, as it were, commenting. Each time the musical bow came in he made noises with his mouth, a continuous zzzzzzzzz (voiced).

In the present recording several pieces were played in a row without a pause. The recording was 4 m. 13 s. long. An extract appears on the record, item B/4.

In the first piece the musical bow plays with a pronounced rumba motional structure. Maybe it was not accidental that Virasanda gave me the title "Chirumba chetu" which is also the start of his text. It must remain unexplained for the moment whether this rumba motional form is an old element in *mbulumbumba* playing or whether it has filtered right down from the north via Kinshasa and Luanda to this remote district, whether, therefore, an element of modern Congo guitar music has been seized by young people such as Virasanda and transposed onto a traditional instrument. Southwest Angola is very isolated; transistor radios were unknown in the villages in 1965 and I did not even hear a guitar in the district where I recorded. This, of course, proves nothing, as cultural traits can travel through Africa by the strangest by-ways. Further, it remains to be seen in the future if the word "*chirumba*" has been used in Humbi and Handa music for a long or only a short time.

#### Acknowledgements

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