LUO MUSIC AND ITS RHYTHM

by

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The Luo peoples of Africa live in the western part of Kenya along Lake Victoria and down into Tanzania: they number somewhat over three quarters of a million — quite a considerable group of people. "Luo," say Professor A. N. Tucker and Margaret Bryan[1], "is a name applied to a great number of hardly distinguishable tribes speaking one language." This they place in the Nilotic language group, a linguistic family entirely different from the Bantu family of languages.

For the ethnomusicologist this at once raises the question, 'What of their music? — is it similar to Bantu music? — and if not, what are its characteristics?' It has the reputation of being very difficult: indeed, as far as I know, this essay is the first *exposé* of Luo music — particularly of its rhythmic system. This, in some respects, is so tricky that it has taken several years of concentrated work to pin it down and to become familiar with it.

My assistant was Mr. Jackson Olum Oludhe, an able Luo musician who has a special interest in trying to preserve the musical traditions of the Luo, is both a singer and also a player of the *nyatiti* lyre — the traditional stringed instrument *par excellence* of the Luo.

This present essay is only a preliminary foretaste of our work, the fuller account of which will, we hope, appear later in a book written jointly by Professor Tucker, who deals with the linguistics, and the present author who has dealt with the music.

It is now widely known that African music is built on a rhythmic system which is not only complex but also in some respects radically different from that of Western music. This complexity, in most parts of Africa, is revealed predominantly in drumming. But Luo music displays its rhythmic complexity in a very special way. Among the Luo, drumming is, compared with some parts of Africa, very simple: the African genius for rhythm is exploited predominantly in their songs.

In our experience, the usual basis for African song-rhythms, while un-Western, is nevertheless simple: with the Luo it is exceedingly complicated. In fact, the best way to appreciate what the Luo do is to contrast it with other African practice.

In large parts of Africa the backbone of song-rhythm is a handclap. This clap contains either two basic units of time, or three. A given song will be either totally in the duple form or totally in the triple. The syllables of the song will, with few exceptions, take integral units of time: thus a syllable may occupy one unit, or two, or three, and so on, as in the following examples[2] a) and b) in Fig. 1.

If, on the other hand, the song notes are as in Fig. 1, c) and d), we see that some syllables occupy *fractional* parts of the basic units. Thus in (c) a semiquaver (sixteenth note) is *half* a unit and a dotted quaver (dotted eighth note) is one and a half units: in (d) a dotted quaver is one and a half units, while the units in the triplet are each worth two thirds of a basic quaver unit.

It is the astonishing versatility in exploiting these fractional time-values in a bewildering variety of forms which marks the absolute distinctive nature of Luo singing.

[1] A. N. Tucker and M. A. Bryan: *Handbook of African Languages*, Part III — "The Non-Bantu languages of North-Eastern Africa" p. 105, Oxford University Press for International African Institute, 1956.

[2] A. M. Jones, "African metrical lyrics" in *African Language Studies*, V, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 1964, also *Studies in African Music*, Vol. II *passim*, Oxford University Press, 1959.

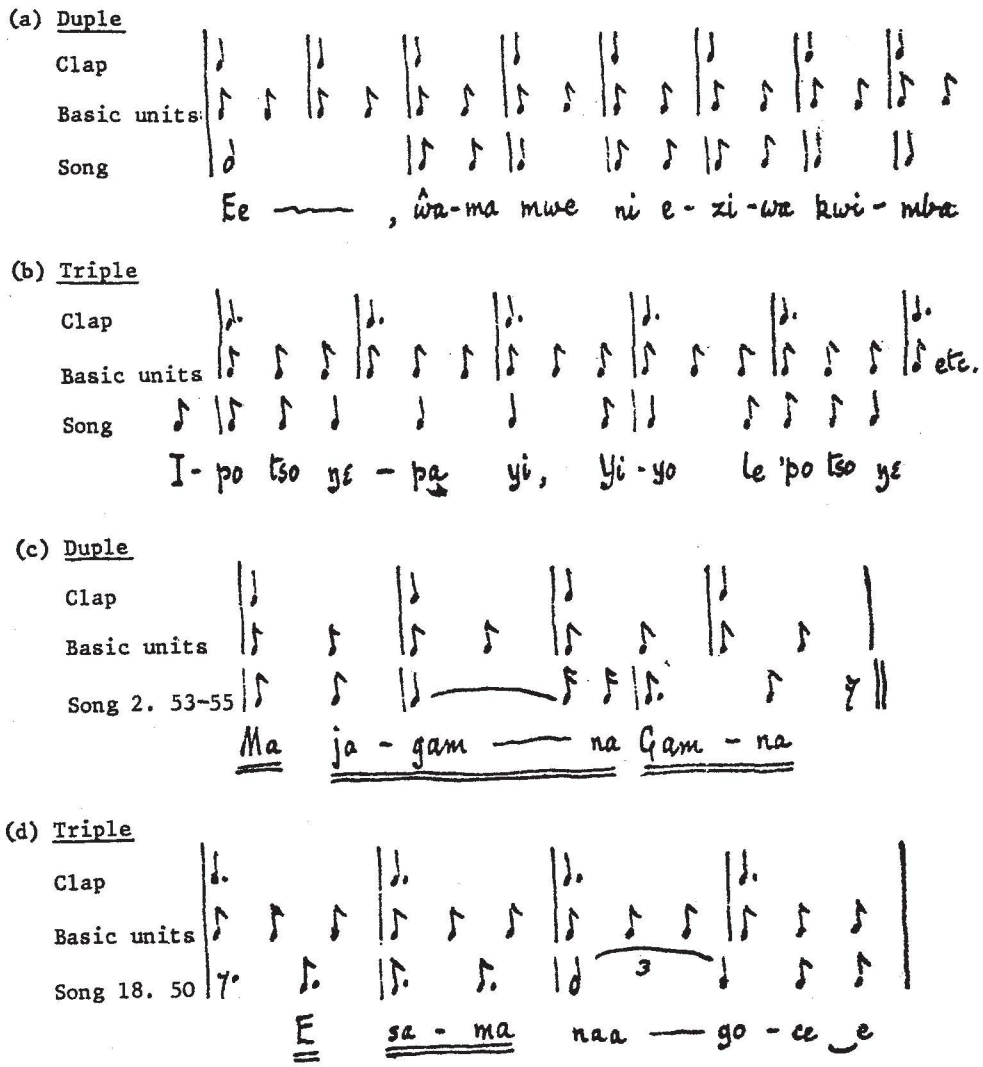

Fig. 1. a) Nsenga, Zambia. b) Adanme, Ghana. c), d) Luo, Kenya.

The result of this technique is that while in some cases a song-syllable falls *on* a clap, in a very large number of cases it seems to be the deliberate choice of the Luo to *avoid* letting the syllable fall on the clap: it may fall before it or after it, but not on it. This means that the song-notes are lying continually athwart the claps which, after all, control the time, so producing an intricate cross-rhythm. It can be observed that in some songs, an overall shapely symmetry is achieved by making the end syllable or two of each line of the song coincide with a clap, thus pulling the song at regular intervals out of its cross-rhythm and aligning it with the clap. But even this does not always happen.

With such irregular song-rhythms one may be tempted to conclude that this is the sort of free-rhythm singing one meets in Eastern Europe, where the time-values of the notes are not absolute, and there is a *rubato* liberty given to the singer to express himself freely as the spirit moves him. But this is certainly not the case with the Luo. However off-beat the singing is, the incidence of each syllable is absolutely fixed in the mind of the singer, and however many times he repeats the song, these syllables will fall in the identical place *vis-à-vis* the clap. It is, we suggest, this very subtle and mathematically exact off-beat singing which is the outstanding feature of Luo music.

A word is needed about the transcriptions. These are extracts from our book. Obviously such a rhythmic system poses great problems for the transcriber. At the outset it must be categorically stated that to try and transcribe a song from a recording is entirely useless. One *must* have a competent singer present at the time.

With such irregular time-values assigned to the song-notes how is the reader to be assured that this is no more than guesswork? The secret of success is to ask the singer to insert intermediate claps between the main claps of the song. One can often go further if necessary, and get him to beat another set of claps between the intermediate ones, thus breaking the main claps into four units. One can then determine with accuracy just where any given syllable falls. If the syllable uses, not a basic time-unit or multiple thereof, but a *fraction* of a unit, or a unit plus a fractional part, the exact duration of this note is thus revealed.

Certain details on the music scores need explanation. Bar-lines are used to show where the stresses in the tune occur, the note immediately following the bar-line taking the stress. Double bar-lines show the natural division of the song into sections, or between Cantor and Chorus. All the tunes are phrased. It is quite impossible for a European to do this: it is imperative to ask the Luo singer how he feels about the matter — and he has no hesitation in giving an answer. The phrases in the score are therefore a genuine and valuable expression of Luo music. Not infrequently they do not lie where a European would be inclined to place them.

Above the clap or *gara* line there are square brackets carrying numbers. These brackets again have been determined by the Luo singer. They indicate the metrical form of the song. The Luo musician finds no difficulty in indicating which groups of claps 'belong together'. The figures show the number in each bracket of claps or of *gara* beats. What the figures show so conclusively is that the metrical form of Luo music is built of groups of two or three units. In this respect it is exactly like the music of the Bantu and of the Ewe people in Ghana. If one counts the number of syllables in each line of the song, there seems to be nothing rational about it. But, having transcribed it, when the square brackets are inserted, the metrical plan of the song becomes perfectly clear.

Finally, the small figures (using odd numbers) above the music are merely reference numbers to identify any given point in the song.

We are now ready to examine the music examples. They are all from Luo marriage songs (*wend kend asera*), and except for Fig. 7 are traditional Luo music.

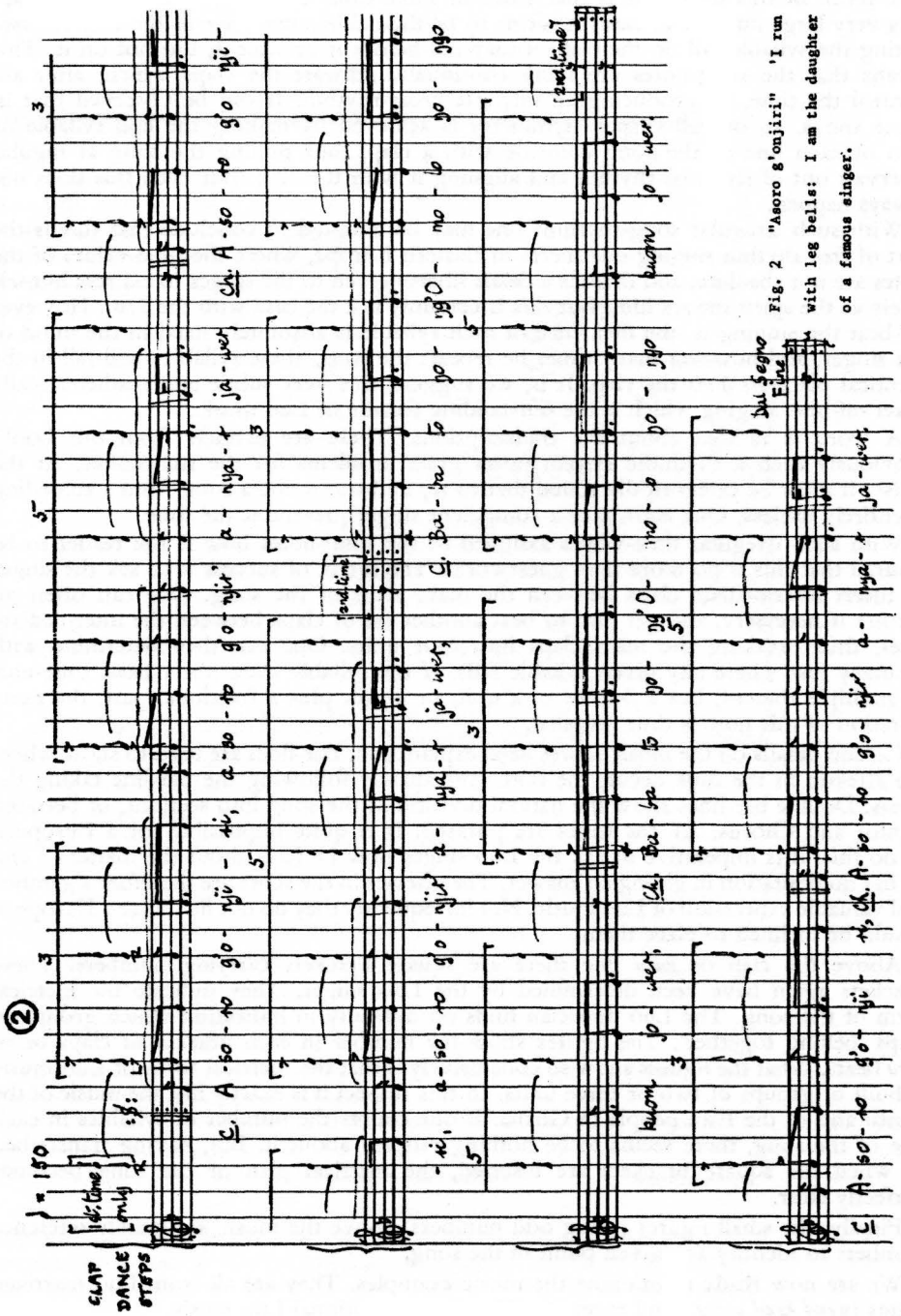

Fig. 2 "Asoro g'onjiri" 'I run with leg bells: I am the daughter of a famous singer.

Fig. 2 gives a complete song. The square brackets above the claps show the metrical organisation of these claps: it is $(3 + 5 + 3 + 5) \times 2$: $(3 + 5 + 3 + 5) \times 2$: $(3 + 5) \times 2$ all repeated. Note that $3 + 5 = 8$, and 8 is a typical metrical number in Bantu music — in fact the whole of this analysis is typical of Bantu practice.

The Dance steps being in duple form (R + L) fight against the clap phrasing with its 3's and 5's producing a counter-rhythm.

The song-melody is for the most part essentially in 3/8 time — (triple) — and therefore fights the claps which control it and also the Dance steps (duple). It makes much use of the two dotted quavers instead of three quavers and even breaks these in an irregular manner (at bars 7, 15, 23, 31 and 39). Further, in this song, the melody at the end of the lines does not coincide with the claps. Both these two features are entirely *un*-Bantu and absolute characteristics which put Luo music in a class by itself. The whole song, in spite of these irregularities, flows smoothly along and — as in Bantu practice — is sung *legato*.

Fig. 3 shows how sticks are used as an added accompaniment. They make a steadily repeated pattern in 3/4 time, the quavers with tails up taking the stress, those with tails down being subordinate. The sticks, in fact, reinforce and embellish the claps which also are grouped in 3/4 time.

The song-melody exhibits the same features as Fig. 2, including the fact that it does not coincide with the clap at the end of the lines. When one hears it sung it goes so smoothly and appears to be so simple that its innate complexities are quite unsuspected until one starts to transcribe it. At once trouble starts, for Mr. Oludhe is adamant as to the incidence of the song-notes *vis-à-vis* the claps. Even if the note — e.g. *-ko* of *nyako* (bar 1) seems at first hearing to fall on a clap, he won't have it: it *must* be a quarter of a clap-beat late — and so on all through the song.

In Fig. 4 we see a song accompanied by the leg-bells, *gara*. As the Right and Left foot alternately stamp the ground, the bells sound and take the place of hand-claps. In this song the *gara* beats are phrased in sets of 6 R-L pairs, and this phrase corresponds with the exact length of a line sung by the Cantor plus the Chorus reply. Further, though the song-melody starts with an *arsis* (short unaccented note) each time the Cantor enters, yet in the first accented song note each time coincides with the first beat of the *gara* phrase. In this way, in spite of the very irregular time of the melody, it is held firmly to the underlying framework of the piece.

The duration of the individual notes of the song is astonishingly tricky. Nothing like this occurs in Bantu music, where as we have already remarked, a syllable almost always occupies one or more basic units of time and *never* fractional parts as in this song (except for occasional triplets). Every note of the song has been most carefully (and painfully!) plotted by the author, with nothing left to guesswork.

There is a further feature in the melody which holds it firmly to the framework of the *gara* beats. This is that, unlike the previous songs, the last note of each of the Cantor's lines falls right *on* a *gara* beat. This, as we remarked, is a characteristic of Luo music, which often but by no means always occurs at the ends of lines. The last note of the chorus, for instance, does *not* fall on a *gara* beat — it just misses it and comes in a trifle late, and this happens each time the chorus sings.

The Cantor's tune occupies ten *gara* beats and is divided into two phrases covering six and four *gara* beats respectively. These numbers are typical of Bantu practice in song-phrasing, at least they form one of several ways in which the Bantu phrase their melodies.

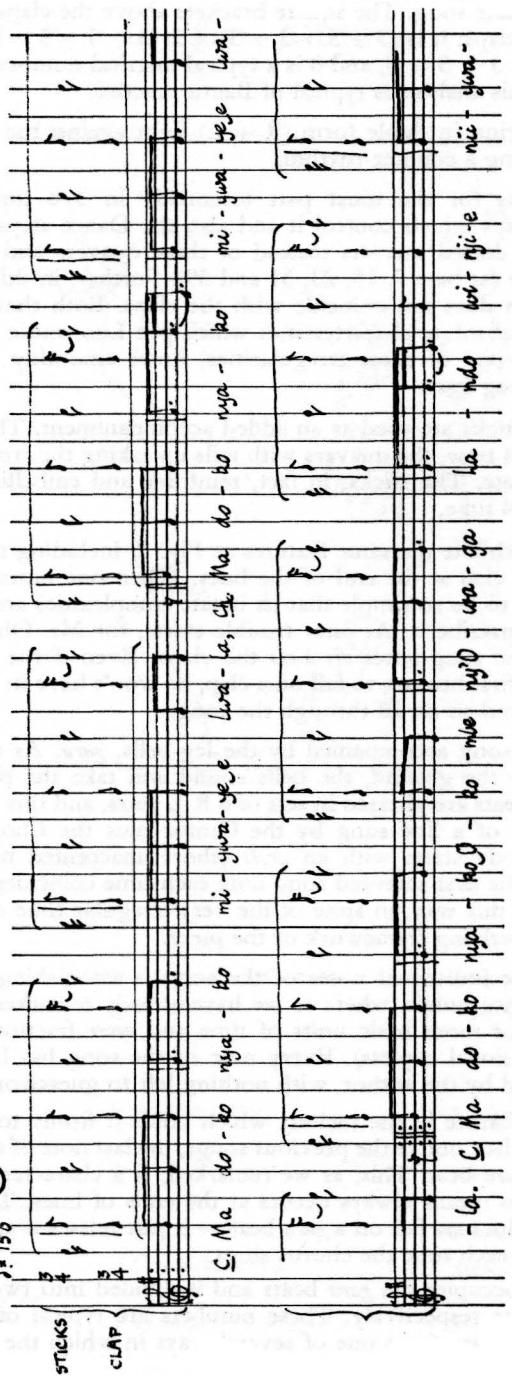

Fig. 3 "Madoko nyako" 'Is this the girl to be dragged?' It is a Luo custom for the bridegroom to drag his bride from her home by force.

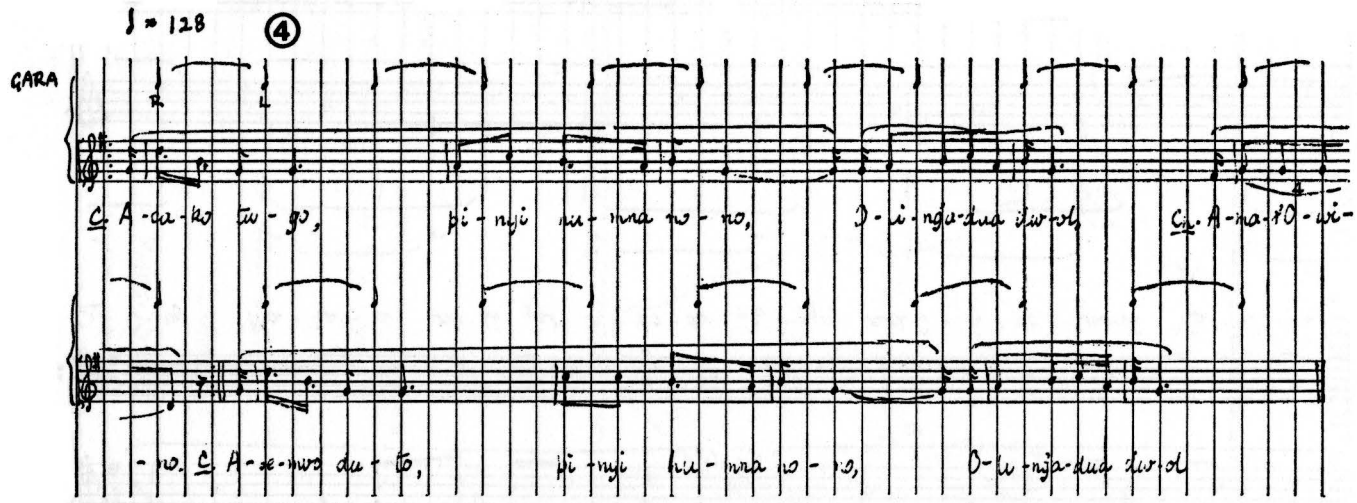

Fig. 4 "Acako tugo" 'I have begun to dance: I am going to sing songs so sweetly that the world will be astonished.'

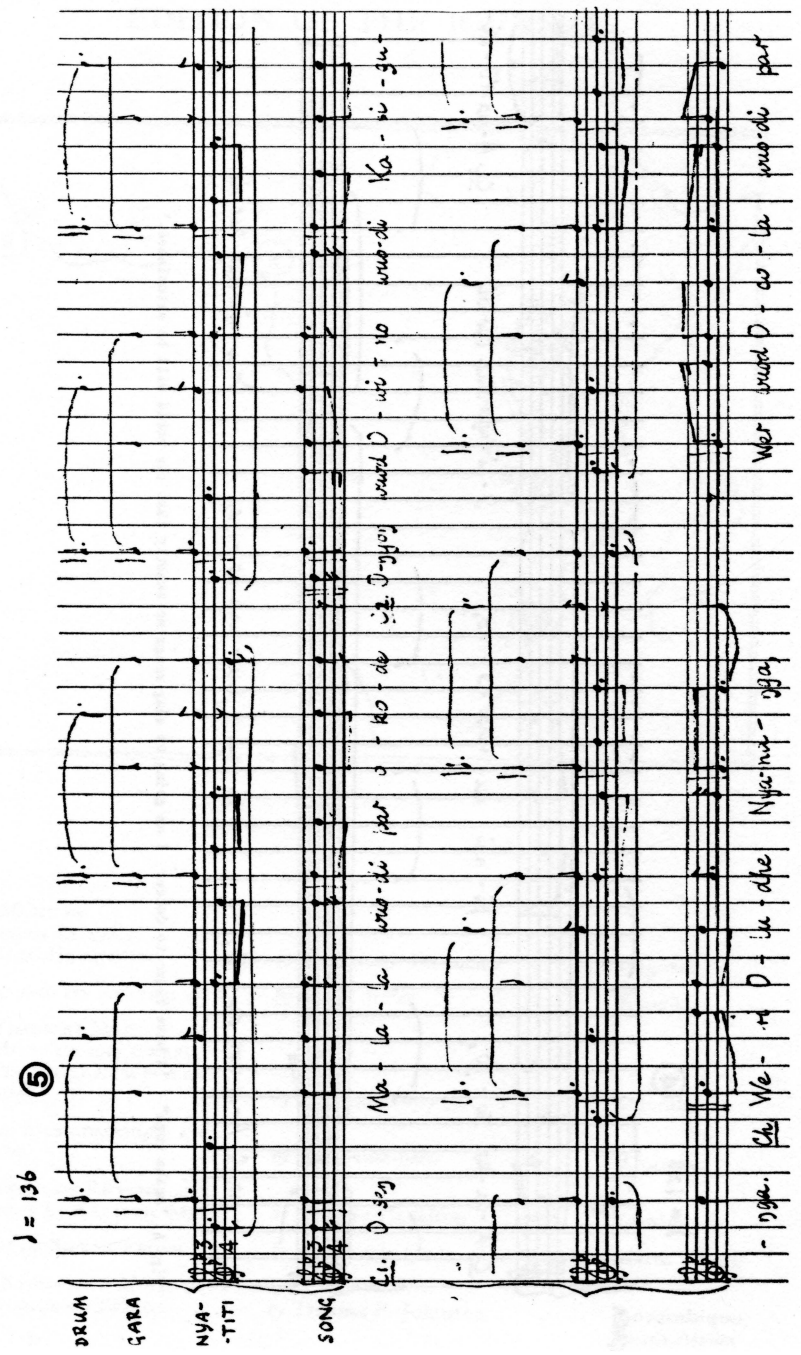

Fig. 5 "Oseŋ Malala" 'Son of the home of cow-bells', i.e. his father is rich in cattle: a song about anybody of whom this could be said.

Fig. 5 is full of interest. Besides the *gara* there are a drum and the *nyatiti* — an eight-stringed bowl lyre played by plucking with the fingers.

The basic beat is provided by the *gara* which once again has a triple rhythm. But it has an added complication: while stamping the feet, the body of the performer sways alternately to right and left to each group of three *gara* beats. One would expect this sway to coincide with the *first* beat of the *gara* bar; but it doesn't — the swing from R to L and *vice versa* takes place on the *third* beat of the *gara* bar, thus producing a powerful counter-rhythm.

The drum is in the phase with the *gara* but is playing two-against-three. This drumming, compared with other African practice, is extremely and unusually simple.

Normally, the *nyatiti* places its melody — as here — in its lower notes and embellishes it with its higher ones. So on the score, the *nyatiti* melody is indicated by the notes with tails turned down, and the embellishment with tails turned up. Note that the *nyatiti* tune is completely staggered with both *gara* and drum, but is kept aligned to them by the ornamental note (top F) which every time coincides with the first and third *gara* beats.

Now the song-melody. There are two separate Cantors and a Chorus needed for this song. The melody for each of these three is exactly the same length as one *nyatiti* tune, and is linked to the *gara* in that the first accented syllable of the Cantors' and Chorus tune falls on the first beat of the *gara* bar. Apart from this, the tune follows the normal Luo custom of an additive rhythm made up frequently of fractional parts of the basic crotchet beats of the *gara*. Once again, in singing, it just flows along and one would never expect, by just listening, this extreme subtlety of note-values.

Fig. 6 shows a song accompanied by the *ahiriri* — a bowed single-stringed fiddle. This instrument is widespread in Africa and so is not a special Luo feature. In fact, it will be noticed on the score, that in playing, the way it keeps strictly to the beats of the dance step is not typically Luo practice. But the Luo complex rhythm is very strongly present in the song. This transcription is a tiny extract from a long recording, and as the singer goes on one wonders how he ever manages to keep in step with the *ahiriri*, so free is his rhythmic treatment.

In our transcription one can see how he establishes his *rapport* with the dance steps. His first line of words — as far as the comma — has its main stresses falling each time on the left (less important) foot of the dance step. But look at his second sentence: its accents fall half-way between the steps. It is just this continual kaleidoscopic shifting of rhythms to unexpected places *vis-à-vis* the basic framework, together with what is to us a most extraordinary mixture of fractional note-values which is at the very heart of Luo rhythmic aesthetic. It is utterly different from Bantu practice, but in performance it is very strongly rhythmic and quite captivating. It is, I suggest, the great contribution of the Luo to the rhythm of the world's music.

Our final example, Fig. 7, is quite a different sort of music. It is part of another wedding song, but it is modern Luo pop music — which they call *nduma*. A glance at the score shows how utterly uncharacteristic of Luo traditional practice it is. In fact its rhythmic set-up is 100% European — or shall we say American. The clap is duple, and the song also is strictly duple throughout, and further, the rhythms of both clap and song-tune completely coincide. Everything is four-square: besides the duple time, we see that each line of the Cantor's tune and each line of the Chorus occupy four bars. Even the slight syncopation at *Ooma* is typical jazz procedure.

There is however one feature of Luo traditional practice, and that is the rhythm of the Triangle-drum, called *ongeng'o*. The instrument itself is modern and is a Luo adaptation of a European triangle, consisting of a circle of iron held over a hollow three-ply wooden box, and beaten by a short iron rod. Not only is its rhythm syncopated, but its main accent is placed right between the claps and forms a powerful cross-rhythm with the song-melody. This is the only concession in the whole piece to Luo

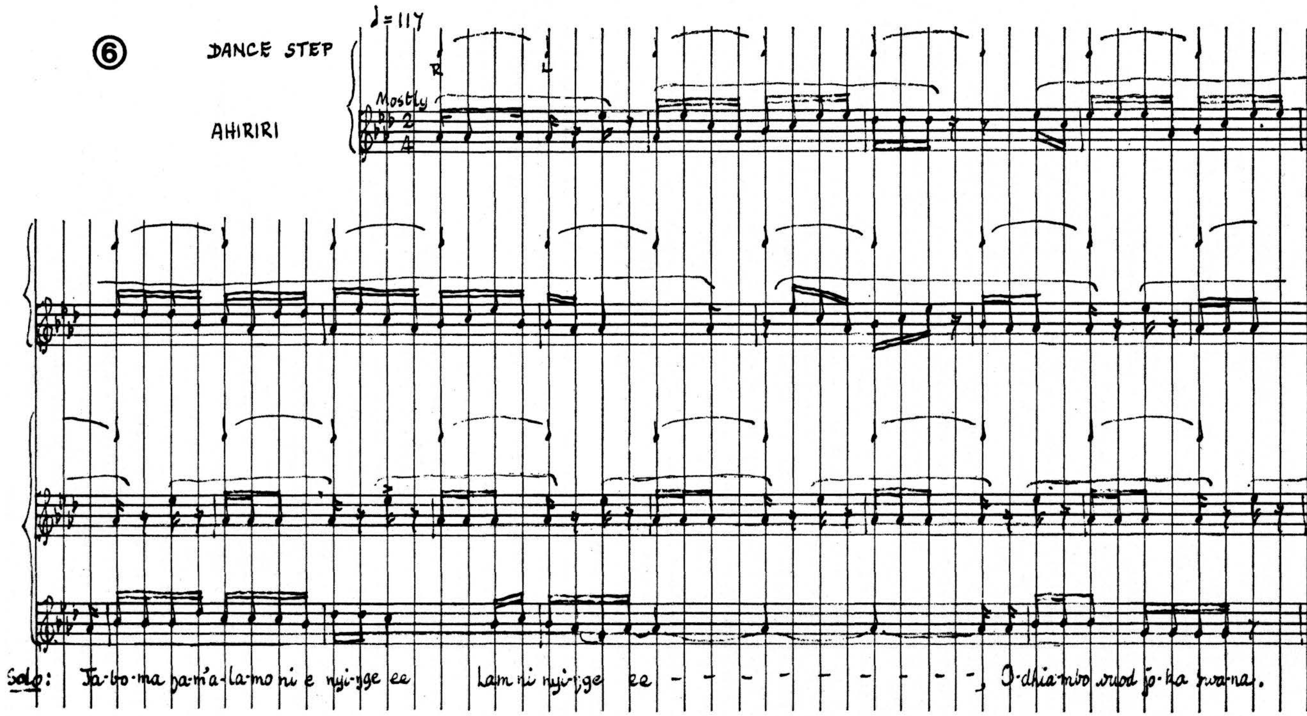

Fig. 6 "Jaboma ŋam' alamo" A townsman's song. 'My children, I would sing about Odede'.

(This song was sung to me by Mr. Oludhe around 1966: I transcribed it direct from him. The Editor points out that Dr. Hugh Tracey recorded the same song in 1950, under the name 'Odhiambo Odet'. It was played by Ogalo Mirasi at Bondo near Kisumu, Kenya; published by I.L.A.M., Music of Africa series GALP 1322, B-1 and Sound of Africa series TR 168, A-1.)

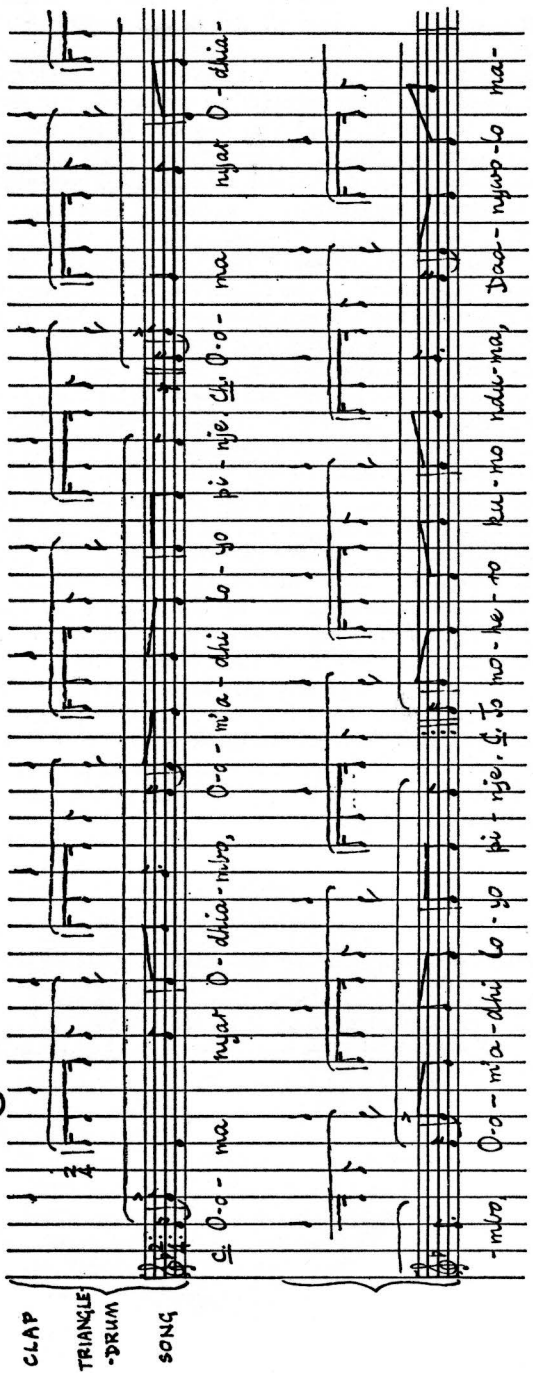

Fig. 7 "Ooma nyar Odhiambo" 'I have been invited, daughter of Odhiambo'

ideas of music. This *nduma* style is, of course, a pathetically banal departure from the splendid real Luo tradition — but then all Africa is suffering from this Western pop music influence.

To return to the real Luo music, we see that its unique characteristic is the complexity of the rhythm of the vocal line. How on earth, one may ask, can they sing such unusual additive patterns with precision? — and yet they do. What, then, is the guiding idea in their minds which controls them? Here we can only speculate — no traditional African musician consciously directs himself by analytical considerations: he just does what is customary. However, my own solution is this. Whereas the Bantu divide their hand-clapping into two units of time, or three, per clap, and their song-melodies are built on these units of time, the Luo subdivide the clap beats into four units — thus a crotchet clap is mentally divided into four semiquavers. The song-melody can take any number of these semiquavers for a given note — maybe two, or three, or more, and arrange these irregular sized notes in any order. This would account for the fractional duration of notes as I have transcribed them.

It is important to note that this system still preserves a fundamental feature of Bantu music which is that the clap-beats are divided into *simple* fractional parts, in this case four. Thus one does not get irrational divisions of the clap-beat such as five or seven units to the clap. The only exception in our transcriptions is in Fig. 4 where at bars 6 and 12 we get four quavers sung to the time of three quavers of the *gara* beats. But here the explanation is easy — the singer had to tuck in four syllables in the space of one and a half *gara* beats, and so he did the obvious thing — he just sang them. Yet the Bantu never organise their song line in this subtly split-hair rhythmic style. It is a Luo peculiarity. In fact, the Luo, whose drumming technique is so very simple, appear to incorporate in the rhythm of their song-melodies the same sort of rhythmic complexity which other tribes exhibit in the playing of their Master drum.

Lastly, these fragmentary transcriptions give little idea of the interest and variety to be found in Luo songs. In a brief essay they are all one can manage. But to appreciate Luo music, one needs transcriptions of complete songs from beginning to end. The book we hope to publish contains such transcriptions in plenty. Meanwhile what we have attempted to do here is merely to give a brief preliminary survey of this very unusual and remarkable musical system.

NOTE: The interested reader who wishes to hear Luo music may like to know that there are in the International Library of African Music's Sound of Africa Series three 12-inch L.P.'s of this music:

1. Traditional music with *gara* (leg bells) and often also with *nyatiti* (=*thum*) the 8-string lyre: TR 166, B-5,6,7; TR 167, A-1,2,3; B-5,6,7; TR 168, A-4,5,6,7.
2. Modern Luo 'pop' music. This music is called *nduma:* my Fig. 7 is in this style: TR 167, A-4,5; TR 168, B-4,5,6,7.