
FIELDWORK IN LANGO, NORTHERN UGANDA FEB – MAR 1997

by

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Very little academic research has been carried out into the rich and varied musical traditions of the north of the country in contrast with those of the relatively well-explored areas of Bantu-speaking southern Uganda. Yet acquaintances among the Baganda for instance, have often expressed their admiration of the attractive harp and zither music of the Acholi in the north. Less well-known are the lamellaphone-playing traditions of the same general area – notably those of the Acholi, their southern neighbours the Lango people and the Teso people (to the east of Lango). In 1968 a brief fieldwork visit to eastern Acholi had made me aware of widespread and spirited use of the *lukeme* (the Acholi term for their box-resonated lamellaphone) in ensembles of a dozen or more young men or boys – playing on instruments in three different sizes. Unfortunately the continuing activities of rebel groups belonging to the so-called ‘Lord’s Resistance Army’ under their leader John Kony made it quite impracticable for me to visit any part of Acholi when in February 1997 I tried recently to follow up the initial research I made some 19 years earlier.

Lango however was a different matter even though the long-distance buses to Lira had to pass through parts of Acholi-land and were occasionally troubled by Kony and his raiders. The Langi (pl. of Lango) share the Lwo language and many other features of their culture with the Acholi but otherwise are ethnically more like the Teso their neighbours to the east. The menfolk of all these peoples enjoy the ensemble playing of lamellaphones in groups of up to 20 instruments plus percussion and sometimes a flute or fiddle. The lamellaphones are of the box resonated kind, are generally made in three sizes. The Acholi call them *likeme*, the Langi *okeme* and the Itesot *akogo*.

Basing myself at Lira I visited villages up to 30 miles around, though travel was difficult. Even so-called main roads were little more than dirt tracks which often narrowed down to barely a metre wide where collapsed and neglected culverts made it impassable for four-wheeled vehicles as the roads meandered among the swampy terrain. The daily hire of a 90cc motor-scooter proved the most useful solution for travel. Compared with the south of Uganda Lango has seen little or no economic development since the end of ‘the troubles’ of the 70s and 80s and new houses (outside Lira itself) are rare. Reconstruction is inhibited by the nearby threat of Kony and his boys still ten years after the eventual collapse of the disastrous Amin and Obote regimes. The 1997 dry season had turned into a veritable drought and villagers were underfed and generally having a difficult time.

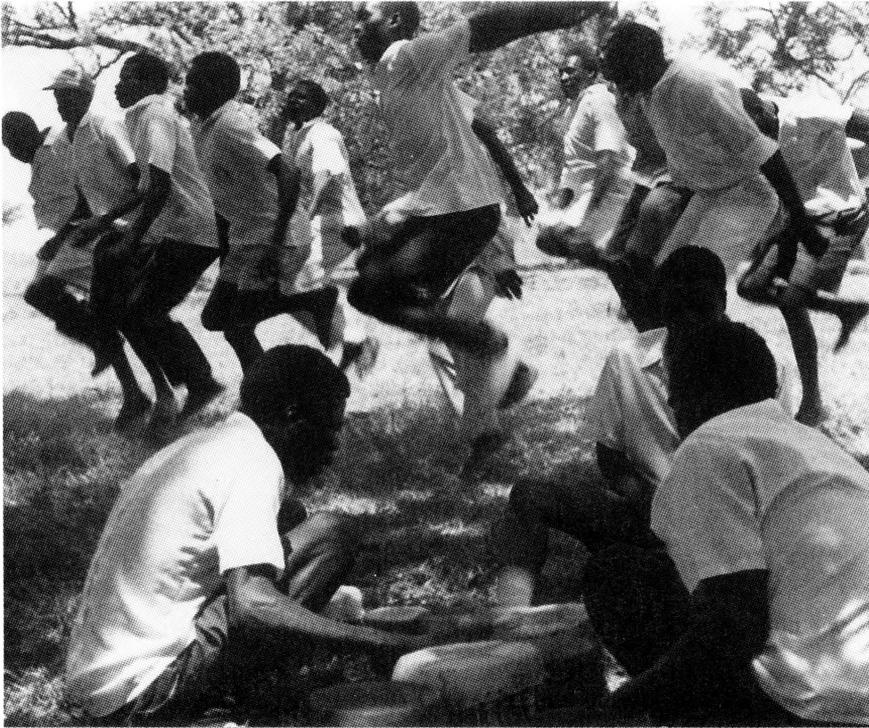
Nevertheless, it was relatively easy to find groups of young men in most villages



The *okeme* club 'Abwoc Yie Kec' (Just stroll, don't stay tied to your wife's apron strings) at Abi-Apala, near Lira, 9 Feb 1997.

who were happy to sit around and play their *okeme*-s while waiting for the arrival of the rains. In fact the very first evening of my arrival I was told of an *ikoce* competition a few miles outside Lira town. It was just ending as I was hurried out there (on the back of a pushbike) but I was in time to watch the winning team perform their last dance as night fell. *Ikoce* is a leaping dance for a well-drilled team of men, incorporating precision unison and octave singing. The danced part is regulated by a leader who sings and plays on a drum-chime of eight or more small drums played by the hand. He in turn is accompanied by another who provides a rapid double beat (with two small sticks) on pair of small drums. It had been easy to find the venue of this competition, for the cloud of dust arising from the dancing arena – nothing more than a dry open field – could be seen from over a kilometre away. The fact that the dancing featured precision leaping and stamping underlined cultural affinities with the para-Nilotic cattle-herding peoples of the east (Teso, Karamoja and Pokot). The drum chime is known on its own as *myel bul*, and seemed to have been a rare ensemble in the 1950s and 1960s. Wachsmann recorded them as *myel bul* during 1954 but his recordings of the *ikoce* dance itself did not include a drum chime.

It seems that inter-village competitions are popular in Lango no matter how hard living conditions might be. There are two seasons for competitions: *ikoce* is danced in February, *okeme* is performed during the second dry season in August and groups practise hard beforehand so as to put on a good show. Preparing a well rehearsed and vigorous programme is one way of maintaining one's spirits at a time when morale



The 'Dim Abilo' club demonstrating *ikoce* dancing at Barr, near Lira, 6 Feb 1997. Some of the *myel bul* drums are in the foreground.

is still generally low following the defeat of the essentially northerner armies of Amin and Milton Obote by Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army in 1986. Nevertheless most Lango men are pleased that relative peace and justice have returned to Uganda.

Although the *okeme* groups were not competing during the time of my visit it proved easy enough with the help of an old friend, Tom Okech – a former student on an in-service teachers' course I ran in 1968 – to meet and record seven different groups spread around Lira district, from Apac in the west to Adumara (near the Acholi border) in the north east. About a dozen hours of playing were recorded on a Walkman DAT with a single-point Sony stereo microphone (Sony ECM 959A). The equipment behaved extremely well despite the atrociously hot and dusty conditions and the resulting DAT tapes show no sign of deterioration since the recordings were made.

The work aimed to sample the repertoires of a number of groups as fully as possible and also to make analytical recordings of the parts played on individual instruments for selected songs. A few examples of other musical genres was also sampled including the *apica* (womens dance), *wer kongo* (beer music) and *wer rudi*

(twin songs) performed by women's groups. I also sampled the Lango *otule* flute dance as well some of the Lango *ikoce* dances. Finally I sampled some *adungu* (Alur harp) playing of another Lango young men's group. *Adungu* is the name given to a type of bow harp originally belonging only to Alur (a part of West Nile district near the border with Dem. Rep. of Congo), but its has spread throughout Uganda, partly as a result of its adoption for school music. In Lango and Acholi it is often played as a trio of two small harps and one very large bass instrument whose sound-box alone is often a metre in length. The trio is popular at beer parties in Lango (and even as far afield as Busoga in south-eastern Uganda) and the type of music favoured is *zairwa* in origin – that is – modelled on the popular guitar music of Dem. Rep. of Congo (former Zaire) musicians.

Participant observation is favoured by ethnomusicologists these days and makes good sense to me. I located a group of young men living in the slums of Lira (refugees who lost their means of a livelihood as a result of the deprivations of Karimojong cattle rustlers in eastern Lango) and one of the group, Peter Awio, agreed to come and teach me. Significantly their *okeme*-s had been about the only property they took with them when they fled from their villages. The first piece I was taught – a so-called beginner's piece – sounded as complex and fast to play as any other, and I felt foolish when I found I was initially unable to grasp what was required. Recording the song (including the parts for each hand) so that I could work away on my own proved a solution for me, but clearly it was not the way young men learned to play as I discovered when I began playing back individual representations of group playing of particular songs.

It takes time to learn the physical layout of the keyboard, then it appears that only the the general outline of a new song is grasped and attempted initially. Eventually, despite the polished togetherness of the ensembles each player will have created his own version of the song model – his own way of realising it – and the complexity of each version of the model varies according to the expertise of the player. Instruments of the same size will often show different personal arrangements of keys for the same tuning. What is clear is that rapid reduplication of pitches and the frequent additional insertion of octaves and fifths are among the rules of performance. Rapid duplication of a couple of notes of the same pitch is achieved by having usually a couple of pitches available on both sides of the instrument (so that the thumbs can rapidly drum on the same pitch). This thickens the texture and can give rhythmic impetus where required. My beginners' song neatly encapsulated all these features. A sample of such ensemble playing (like the *adungu* harps, using treble, tenor and bass instruments) which accompanies the well rehearsed singing of the songs' texts can already be heard on the recently issued Swedish CD CAP 21553 (Music from Uganda 2. Modern traditional). Its partner CD (Music from Uganda 1. Traditional - CAP 21495) also includes one track of *ikoce* music.

The *okeme* instruments are built to provide pentatonic music but until the tunings

have been analysed it is too early to be more precise about tunings. Some groups knew and used two different tunings. One they called *ter lango* (Lango tuning) and the other *ter acholi*. The Acholi tuning, which, incidentally was used by most of the groups I met, was closer to an equidistant pentatonic tuning than the Lango tuning. To change from Acholi tuning to Lango usually needed only two pitches to be altered. The change was rapidly and expertly demonstrated when I recorded a sample of the repertory of Mr Julius Ekukha, of Abia-Apala, who is recognised as a ‘professional’ soloist and well-known through the region for his witty, spicy and powerfully didactic texts. The three sizes of instrument span altogether some four octaves with usually two octaves being available on each *okeme*. Mr Ekukha’s instrument was of tenor size.

In common with instrumentalists throughout much of central Africa, Mr Ekukha first played up to half a dozen or so cycles of the *okeme* part before commencing to sing. Both his texts and those of the various groups usually addressed contemporary problems. Of those songs I have so far examined such phrases as follow are typical. For the song “Dongo Lobo” (Developing Uganda):

People we need to stay low
 That’s the only way the country can develop
 People, we need to stay low
 That’s the only way our home can develop
 We the Langi ourselves
 We the Langi are the ones who caused the problem for ourselves
 We want to enter into intrigues
 Whose details we know nothing about, people
 What have we done?
 We should see only ways of developing our country
 Let us not enter into intrigues
 Whose details we know nothing about, we people, the Lango
 It will cause us to spoil our peace and cause us to live in sorrow
 If we want to develop our country .
 We must leave jealousy
 Jealousy will not develop the country, people
 If we want to develop our country
 We must love education

He repeatedly insists that the way to a good life is no longer through the power of the gun as it was in the days of the rule of Milton Obote – twice prime minister of Uganda and himself a Lango, living now in exile.

In another performance he poked fun at a certain man who tried to avoid paying taxes by hiding inside a granary, but who was enticed out with the offer of a cigarette. He warned his audience sitting attentively around the walls of a circular thatched hut which served usually as the staff common-room of a nearby primary school but made an excellent performance and recording venue:

You peasants, I say this to you before I have eaten
 You be careful and pay your poll tax immediately
 And then you can sit down and drink beer
 The spreader-of-information has spoken his views in the open

In common with singers I have worked with elsewhere in Uganda, Ekukha sees himself primarily as an educator and social critic. The translations given above were made by Mr Okaka Opio Dokotum who recently gained his MA at Makerere with a detailed survey of Lango oral poetry and of *ikoce* and *okeme* competitions in particular. Mention of Mr Okaka introduces another aspect of the fieldwork, the opportunity, indeed the need, for visiting researchers to combine with local experts in productive research.

Of the organisation of such competitions Okaka has written:

In Lango, oral poetry for both the *okeme* and *ikoce* is announced by a promoter in conjunction with a hosting team who have an arena. The announcement is sent to as many teams as possible to persuade them to attend the performance since there are several competitions going on in the season of performance. The announcement is in writing and participation is by invitation. The letter of invitation indicates the date of the competition, arena and cash prizes from top to bottom. Contained in the letter is also regulations on arrival, registration and participation. The examination of Oral Poetry is a complete process from the moment of arrival to the end of the competitions in the award of prizes. The team of examiners constitute the most talented and knowledgeable men in oral poetry performance set up by the host team with specific areas of specialisation. The promoter hands over the cash prizes to the local administrative officials and regains his money by collecting dues from the market that forms at the arena of performance.... Although arrival is not examinable, the award of prizes begins with the arrival of participants. The amount of money staked for the first team to arrive is always reasonable enough to encourage punctuality. Consequent arrivals earn less and less. The teams travel at night and reach the arena before dawn and when the sun rises, the competitions begin.

The emphasis on uniforms, regimented formations, the occasional use of a police whistle to cue dancers and singers and the generally careful organisation may suggest the influence of Terence Ranger's 'Beni phenomenon' as far inland from the coast as northern Uganda. This would not be all that surprising since both Langi and Acholi men were heavily recruited into the King's African Rifles during the colonial period. On the other hand such careful control and sophisticated organisation may be a much older feature of the culture of some of the Nilotic and Para-Nilotic peoples, for musical competitions (unconnected with whatever goes on within the modern education system) have been reported elsewhere in north east Africa (eg. Simon, 1989:202). Finding the answer to the question of the origins of such competitions clearly is a cue for further fieldwork in this culturally very rich but under-researched area of Uganda.

Before leaving Lira I paid one-day visits to each of the two nearby teacher's colleges (Ngetta National Teachers' College and Canon Lawrence Teacher Training

College) in an attempt to learn more about the way the *okeme* lamellaphones are used in education. There seems to be no systematic teaching of *okeme* skills but both music departments produced one or two small groups of students who knew one or two songs and who taught each other. The students proved very interested in possible ways of notating *okeme* songs and there were lively discussions on the advantages and disadvantages of using notations.

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The photographs related to this article can be found on our website at <http://ilam.ru.ac.za>.

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