

deep feeling for "key", which is so well established that we have no need of an incessant tonic or dominant drone as in some less harmony-based folk music, though we still take our cues where we find them and infer the key from the first few notes.

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## NOTES ON AN IDIOPHONE USED IN *KABILE* INITIATION RITES BY THE MBAE

by

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In October, 1953, I sent to the British Museum parts of a tripartite musical apparatus used by the Mbae (Bamanga) tribe during the initiation rites known as *Kabile*. These were obtained shortly before I left for furlough in Europe in 1950 and I hoped on my return a year later to visit the Mbae area and obtain records of the music used for dancing in which this apparatus played a part. In 1951, however, I had to take up work in another part of Congo and have not yet been able to visit the Mbae country. It may be worth while writing a short note on the interesting idiophone seen, for comparison with similar instruments used elsewhere in the hope that a fuller account, accompanied by musical data, may be published later.

*Kabile* initiation rites are known to be practised (or to have been practised in the past) in a number of tribes of the Stanleyville area in Belgian Congo. Until recent years they were confined to the riverine section of the Mbae people but in 1950 a forest village was initiated into the rites by a neighbouring riverine community after a suitable payment for the privilege had been handed over. Until that year the rites had been becoming more and more sporadic. The Christian Church in the area had from its inception taught that the deceitful practices associated with *Kabile* (especially the deliberate cheating and deceiving of women and other non-initiates) were incompatible with Christian teaching and it was probably a certain indignation on the part of Church

leaders—many of them earlier initiates of *Kabile*—at the recrudescence of the rites in a forest community that led them to give a public demonstration of *Kabile* dancing while I was present.

*Kabile* is the name given to an aerophone consisting of a hollowed stem of umbrella-tree wood (*Musanga spp*) about 30 cm. long, closed at one end by a dried leaf (or thick spider's web) and having a side hole near this closed end. The other end is open. Players sing or shout through the side hole, the voice thus becoming deformed. Non-initiates are told that noises so heard are the voice of the "spirit" of *Kabile*.

Initiates have to learn special *Kabile* dances which are accompanied by singing. The dance-leader who teaches them uses an instrument consisting of three parts:

- (a) A pole some 150 cm. long having an elliptical cross section with diameters about 4 cm. and 5 cm. The Baena of the Stanley Falls use an old canoe-paddle stem for the purpose in their *Kabile* rites. The pole is held in the left hand and passes under the left arm-pit to project about 20 cm. beyond the left shoulder.
- (b) A helical shell, common in the forest area, about 12 cm. long, kept in position in the left arm-pit by two strands of cane passing over the shoulder and arm muscles. The large opening of the shell is pressed against the side of the chest and thus forms a sounding box for the pole whose upper end makes contact with it. The player controls the opening between the shell and the skin by movements of his arm.
- (c) A short stick about 30 cm. long held in the right hand and used to strike the long pole at a point about the height of the knees.

Because of the elliptical cross-section of the long pole, it is possible to obtain from it two distinct notes: a high-pitched note when it is struck across its greatest diameter and a lower-pitched note when struck across the shorter diameter. The player can thus use it as a signalling instrument in the same way as the Mbae use a slit-gong (and a horn) for sending messages based on the tonal melodies of their spoken language (and of linguistic elements of other surrounding languages, too, for the signalling language of the Mbae is a composite one).

In the case of the *Kabile* dancing, however, the signals were not those associated with the gong-language. The dance-leader beat out in front of the assembled boys the tonal melody of the first phrase of the song corresponding with the dance he wished to call. He expected his pupils to recognise the song from the tonal melody so given them and thus to begin singing and dancing immediately. Any lad not being able to begin at once was struck on the head with the short stick. I was told that this sanction was sometimes applied so severely that a boy died and his mother was thereupon informed that the *Kabile* "bird" had taken him. Records of musical instruments being used as instruments of murder must surely be rare in the literature!

Another interesting fact gleaned from my informants was that the final choreographic act towards sundown each day was for all the boys to beat their chests violently with the palms of the hands loudly at first and then falling into a diminuendo. The effect was remarkably like that of a huge bird flapping its wings in flight and gradually receding into the distance. Non-initiates were told that this noise was indeed the noise made by the *Kabile* "spirit-bird" taking itself away from the rites for the night.

The use of an idiophone capable of emitting two notes and so being sufficient to suggest sung melodies to dancers is of great interest in view of discussions on the relationship between musical form and the tonal melodies of words associated with music in Central Africa (and elsewhere). It will be most interesting to have accurate records of these *Kabile* songs and the signals given by the leader to the boys. Earlier studies of song form in this part of Congo have convinced me that the tonal melody of words used is the primary factor determining musical form; that indeed, musical form is little more than the essential tones of linguistic elements accompanying the music. The use of this instrument in the *Kabile* dances would seem to support such a thesis.