

THE LUKUMBI

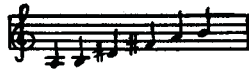
A six-toned slit drum of the Batetela

by

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Three types of drum are used by the Batetela, a Bantu tribe situated between the Lomami and the Sankuru rivers in the Kasai Province of central Belgian Congo. The *ngomo* skin drum is used for dancing, usually accompanying the *lukumbi*, the six-toned slit drum. The *ekuli*, a small cylindrical two-toned drum, formerly used to signal victory in battle, is now used to call people to church and classes. The *lukumbi* is the most interesting and intricate of the three, and constitutes a highly developed poetic and musical art form as well as a means of communication.

The scale of the *lukumbi* consists of a whole tone interval, an interval of two tones, two intervals of $1\frac{1}{2}$ tones, and a whole tone. Notes 5 and 6 are an octave repetition of 1 and 2. For example, the *lukumbi* I own, a medium sized one of a type often used for sending messages, has this scale:—



Notes 1, 3, and 5 are on the right side as the drummer holds the drum; 2, 4, and 6 are on the left side. The lowest tone is nearest the mouth. The *Lukumbi* varies in size; the larger they are the "larger" (lower) the tone, but the relative scale remains the same.

Although the Otetela language has only two relative tones, at least three tones, and sometimes more, are used in sending messages on the *lukumbi*. This adds to the most ordinary message a shading, a musical quality impossible on the purely utilitarian *ekuli*.

For example, *Kenda lokendo shamanya*, meaning "come in a hurry", is expressed thus on the *lukumbi*:
and on the *ekuli*:

Kenda lokendo shamanya	Kenda lokendo shamanya
3 4 5 3 2 3 4 5	1 2 2 1 1 1 2 2

The *lukumbi* is also used as a purely musical instrument, but for the purpose of this article I am interested in its telegraphic and poetic function.

Since many words have the same tones and could not be distinguished if drummed alone, a phrase is usually made to represent a word. The phrase may be a proverb, a picturesque definition, or a simple sentence which has become stylized.

Examples: *saka*, a basket, is expressed by a proverb *ukumba haluli mbulu*, which means, "The big basket is not filled by the copper objects (crosses, bracelets, etc.) offered as bride price." This is said of one who asks and is never satisfied.

dja, fire, becomes *lumbi la mpetsba uluku*, "the flame for heating the coffee."

ma, food, is *w'andja kuleki*, "the greatest thing in the world", or *ukama wa kudi'untu*, "a lump of that which makes a man grow".

lambukemula, "I greet you", *utukudjase*, "Sit down a little while", *ulimu utu? wememe utu?*, "Only work? Only standing up?" are simple ordinary expressions easily recognized in the context of the *udimba* greeting someone coming from a journey.

It is quite possible to learn to recognize and to play messages on the *lukumbi* without knowing all the words, if one learns the phrases as little tunes. Some of the words used in the phrases are archaic, and the drummer may not be able to interpret the individual words of the complete phrase.

Example: *kete*, earth, is expressed as *udimu a pengandu*. *Pengandu* is presumed to mean *pundju*, forever, but is not now used in the spoken language. A semanticist should find plenty of material for study in the expressions played on the talking drum.

Names are a special and difficult art which only the professional *udimba* masters. The old village *udimba* must be a walking genealogy, for the individual's full name includes the name of his father and the name given him from his mother's people, as well as his own name. Individuals rarely know their full *lukumbi* names.

Examples: A student named Emil Oma Losombe answers to the call of: *Losombe lashama pili*, "The long grass where lies the little antelope." This name is also an example of a phrase using five tones:

Losombe lashama pili

3 4 5 4 3 2 1 2



Pierre Ona Lundula, a nurse, knows this much of his name: *Lundula shang'epenge*, "The lundula bird escapes in the epenge tree." The Lundula, he says, is a "rossignol", a beautiful songbird which imitates whistled tunes and is extremely hard to kill. By coincidence (?) several members of this family have exceptionally fine singing voices. Another phrase in his name is: *Hali konde bambi Lundula*, "Who doesn't eat beans doesn't wrestle Lundula to a throw".

The name of another nurse, Victor Uwandji Ndjate, recalls an ancient legend from the very beginning of the tribe: *Uwandji Ndjati Lokole la tomondja ngandu ta lu sanga*, "Chief Ndjati Lokole of Mondja Ngandu of the pigs' feet." One day the children of Ngandu, one of the three sons of Mongo, ancestor of the tribe, went hunting and killed six hogs. They intended to divide them equally, but Mondja cut off all the feet and took them himself. The other brothers were very angry and told him, "You are greedy and bad, we no longer want to live in the same village with you." Therefore they left that region and scattered to other parts of the country, leaving their brother with the name "Mondja Ngandu of the pigs' feet."

My own Otetela name is Mama Elandu, meaning "diseases", since I am a nurse. My name on the *lukumbi* is as follows: Mama Elandu, *ekokedi a koko*, "hen", *usungu lata kumbu*, "white person tearing down fences" (referring to the first colonizers who tore down barriers and made peace among the tribes) *useka samalu*, "she-goat", *a wetshiambutshimba* (or *ambusaka*) *nyombo*, "doctor shaking his gourd of charms." Any white nurse or female doctor would sound the same, therefore other distinguishing phrases are added, but these I have not been told!

The poetry of the *lukumbi* is best shown in the drum call announcing a death.

The call to mourning

Tshe tshe tshe tshe tshe tshe
 Yewu yewu yewu yewu
 Hawundi kandji liil! Hawundi kandji liil
 Na ne na, na ne na na, ha na ne na liil
 Ambukita wundju teteli,
 Ulundu ambunyuko.
 Ambukitsha lukulu, ambukitsha lowo,
 Ambusuma lukulu, ambusuma lowo.
 Wudja ambushila, wudja ambulana.
 Luwu ambulungula mbaki kuta osondjo.
 Aha shoko yambundututshike mbu liil
 Udu khuku wati: Kangandi.
 Lumbu ntshimbaka mbu liil
 Na wudja akenda anyasu one na?
 Na wudja atsho ameka waha one nkalula one?
 Ambutsho l'udimu a pengandu.
 Ambutsho l'udimu lole tundu.
 Longoswe udimi nyama kandi.
 H'eso tokende.
 Tokende la luhanga laki shesu.

Listen all, listen all, the drum is going to speak:
 It is sorrow I announce, hear my cry:
 Isn't there a pain, O mother! O isn't there a pain!
 What is it, what does it mean, O what can it be?
 He has fallen to earth,
 The mahogany tree has fallen.
 He has laid down his foot, he has laid down his hand,
 He has drawn in his leg, he has drawn in his arm.
 The land is finished, the land is ruined.
 The grass is burned over, the little mice crouch.
 O hasn't he left us trouble, O mother!
 Those who wail for the dead, theirs he is.
 I am dizzy with wailing, O mother!
 To what land do they journey, our brothers?
 What is this land where our friends go and do not return?
 He has gone forever to the earth,
 He has gone to the earth that devours all.
 Prepare for the earth his meat.
 Ah well, let us go.
 Let us go to the resting place of our father.