

INDIVIDUAL NAMES GIVEN TO TALKING-GONGS IN THE YALEMBA AREA OF BELGIAN CONGO

by J. F. CARRINGTON

The practice of giving individual names to talking-gongs has been reported for some central African tribes but is not known among all peoples using this musical instrument¹. It has been found to be common in the Yalembe area of Belgian Congo (Basoko territory, Oriental province) among groups using the gong-language known as (he) So based on the spoken language of the (ba)So tribe. The following article is an attempt to put on record some of these instrumental names while at the same time recording measurements of gongs made in the field.

THE GONGS:

The central African cylindrical idiophone used for signalling with a linguistic basis is well known (Nos. 1, and 2). A log of the heart-wood of *Pterocarpus Soyauxii* (two other trees are occasionally—but much more rarely—used in this area) is rolled out through a narrow lateral slit which becomes the “mouth” of the instrument. The hollowing under one “cheek” is carried further than that under the other so that the former emits a low-toned note when struck with a rubber-covered stick while the latter gives a higher note. In the gongs surveyed for this study, the intervals noted ranged from a musical second (7 gongs) to a sixth (1 gong). The commonest interval was a third (17 gongs). Gong-beaters refer to the low-toned note as the “voice of the male”; the other lip gives the “voice of the female”.

Some gongs were manufactured by their owners (6 of those studied); others were purchased from various villages around Yalembe. There is no one village in this region outstanding as a gong-making village (this is the case, for instance, among the central Lokele tribe living west of Stanleyville, where most of the gongs used today have been manufactured in the village of Yafolo).

There are many more gongs in the Yalembe area than those described and named hereafter. But it is usual that each village group possesses one large instrument regarded as the “voice of the clan” to which a name is given. The other gongs, used for less important messages, do not possess names. It should be noted, however, that in some cases a clan possesses two or more named instruments, one probably fairly new and bought to replace an older one. In a few cases, the clan does not possess a gong at all. This is because of poverty and the lack of clan members. Neighbouring clans regard such a lack as being shameful.

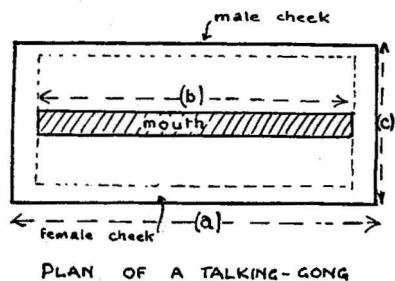
An interesting feature noted in two of the Yalembe gongs was the presence of a small lozenge-shaped hole (5 cm by 3 cm) cut in the side wall, in the centre of the “male” cheek. This is said to have been done on the recommendation of a craftsman from the village of Baonga (opposite Yalembe on the south bank of the river) who claimed that this would allow the sound to escape more easily and so carry further. The chief gong in Baonga village itself has the same type of hole.

Measurements were made of:

- (a) the total length of the gong;
- (b) the length of the slit;
- (c) the diameter of the instrument.

The largest gong is 232 cm long and has 99 cm diameter (No. 30).

The smallest instrument given an individual name had the dimensions 84 cm by 31 cm (No. 37).



NAMING THE GONGS:—

The owner of a new gong has the right to give his instrument its name. In some villages—for instance among the riverine Yalamba folk—the name given to an old gong is continued as the name for its new substitute. The clan Yamotinda claim that they have always had a gong called *lifindi lilome* (No. 40). In other villages, however, a completely new name is given to a new gong. This may be an entirely new construction to suit local events or clan history; but the presence in the list given here of several gongs bearing the same name suggests that the owner is influenced by names for other instruments that he has heard.

It should be noted that the name given to the instrument is not usually the gong-name of the clan which acquires it. The only name recalling a gong-name of the village among those studied is (No. 37).

NAME-TYPES:—

The names recorded for the Yalamba area of Congo fall into four main groups (some names could be placed in more than one of these categories):

(a) *Boastful self-approbation*. This is by far the largest group (30 names out of 47). It contains such claims as:—

“The empty gourd cannot be made to sink in the water”. (No. 39) i.e. even if adversity comes and we seem to suffer from it, we reappear with greater strength than before.

A similar thought is expressed by No. 42, of which No. 23 may be a shortened version.

A second example, in this case showing pride in a reputation for quarrelsomeness is No. 2:

The thorn-covered *bolongo* tree is not beaten with the hands for fear of the thorns.

It is necessary to be well acquainted with local folk-lore in order to grasp the meaning of some appellations. For instance, the bird *motuma* mentioned in No. 8 is believed to spread its wings horizontally during rain so that small animals seek shelter beneath it. Then it brings down its wings upon the shelterers and so kills them. In many tribes of central Congo, the guinea-fowl: *kulokoko* (No. 25) is noted for its predilection for feuds and quarrels among villagers. Our people believe that it encourages the combatants by screaming from a tree near the scene of the fight.

No. 44 is an example of this first group, in spite of its proverb-like character. It is said of a capable village chief that he must learn to shut his ears to what is being said in the village because there will certainly be a good deal of criticism of his actions. Thus the name comes to indicate that the people who use it regard themselves as being in the line of chiefs.

(b) *Expressions of bitterness*. These are the opposite of (a) and are heard from those clans whose members are no longer numerous. The lament may be short and to the point as in No. 3 and No. 29. But it is often couched in poetic language: No. 47, “We eat the last bits of food” (i.e. what will happen when we have gone?);

No. 22, “Birds do not steal from a person who has no food” (i.e. we are so poor as not to have eatables).

The next stage in decline of such a group would be that they would not be able to afford a new gong and would fall into the category of such clans as Yaisomandombo and Yambila of the village of Yaob.

The presence in our villages of numerous clan-groups which are dying out is a reflection of the fall in birth rate that is characteristic of many tribes in Central Africa at the present time. (The birth-rate for the whole of Belgian Africa is rising slowly). Another cause of decreasing numbers in the village communities is, however, the remarkable exodus to the big industrial centres; in our case Elisabetha (Lever Bros) and Stanleyville.

(c) *Proverb-like phrases.* A favourite declaration—common in this area to four distinct clan groups is: “Death knows no master.” (No. 5, 7, 18, 27). Other examples of this kind of name are: No. 15: “One arm alone cannot fight in war.” This idea being expressed again in No. 48.

The idea of No. 17 is again a common “wisecrack” among many Congo peoples. The author has recorded it as a personal gong-name in the Botunga section of the (ba) Mbòle tribe (90 km South West of Stanleyville): “Water never travels up-river.”

It is often quoted as justification for hierarchy in village political life and so could probably be included under names of type (a).

(d) *Animal and plant names.* Except for the two villages of Yaòlò and Yalamba, all the groups studied are forest people. It is not surprising that animal and plant names figure among the individual gong-names. The animals quoted are notable for their power (leopard, python) or for their cleverness (the small antelope, frequently the hero of tribal fables).

Name No. 2 recalls a well-known riddle of the area: Question: “One does not slap the face of the chief’s wife.” Answer: “Rattan cane.”

Because of its thorny bark, rattan cane is not handled without great care—nor does a man use his hands on the most important woman in the village.

USE OF THE GONG-NAMES:—

In important announcements made on the gongs, especially those involving the clan as a whole, the gong-name serves to identify the instrument on which a message is being broadcast. A message may be introduced by the gong-name of the instrument or ended with this same pattern. Frequently a long message is punctuated by repetitions of the name. For instance, in a message broadcast to announce the completion by his clan of moneys that had to be paid because of a recent death in his family, the owner of the gong belonging to the Yalamba clan of Yamoya (the gong nearest to the mission) beat out the gong-name thus; *lombo . . . lombo . . . lombo . . . longalaka' bato*. This was done three times during the broadcast of the message.

That the use of the gong-name in broadcasting is not frequent nor of great importance, is shown, however, by the fact that it was found to be difficult to obtain the correct name for an instrument from anyone who was not its actual owner. On the other hand, every gong-beater knows the gong-names of important people in the surrounding country.

Linguistic notes. The villages whose gongs were surveyed fall into three linguistic groups:

- (a) (li) Hanga speaking group (= Bangelema):
Bokondo, Bongbakpa, Yabibi, Basakani.
- (b) (li) Kile speaking group:
Baema, Yangomu, Yalisihi, Bandio
- (c) Riverine group: Yaòlò, Yalamba (two allied, but distinct, languages).

Most of the gong-names quoted are in the gong-signalling languages used in this area: (He)Sò, (40 out of 47). Five are in (li)Kile, one in (li)Hanga and one in (Lo)Kele.

It is of interest, however, to compare versions from different owners of the same phrase. For instance No. 4, 9, 45. In 4 and 9 the verb: to come, has the root—Y—common to most Bantu languages of our area except (he) Sò where the root is —LU— (as in 45). The Bokondo and Yabibi informants used their own linguistic basis for the verb: to come, instead of the (he)Sò rendering, whereas the Bandio informant used the “purer” gong-language element. Again, compare the verb: not to be, in No. 7 (=18) and 27 where the forms are rendered: *boyasya* and *botyese*.

A similar comparison is seen in 12 and 28: *litisi*, *etyese*. Note also the form given for river (No. 17 and 42):

meindyaitoto, *molindyabitoto*.

In every case, tonal patterns are identical but phonetic elements change. This phenomenon is observed especially where the linguistic basis of the beaten messages is not the spoken language of the tribe. Gong-phrases learned from a nearby tribe that has "lent" its gong-language to neighbours are learned by the former as tonal units but contain phonetic elements that are not properly understood. It follows that, while the tonal patterns remain constant and have significance for the listener, the phonetic elements vary considerably from one beater to another.

An interesting example of assimilation of grammatical form is to be heard in No. 30. The correct (he)Sø rendering of this phrase would be: *moto etielumbo lobeo*.

The Yalisihî form is: *moto te etielumbo lobeo*.

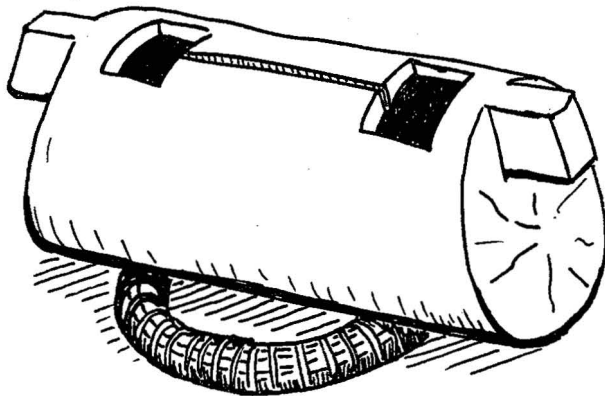
Element *te* is very probably the Lingala negative particle. (Lingala is the lingua franca of the riverine area of Belgian Congo, west of Stanleyville down to the coast). The (he)Sø verb is already in the negative form and does not need a second particle; but the beater introduces it here to reinforce his idea. A similar use of *te* with proper negative verb forms can often be heard in the spoken languages of upper-river areas where Lingala is used as a lingua franca.

FURTHER STUDY:—

Hulstaert³ has reported that Nkundo performers on the bell *elonja* give to their instruments individual names. These instruments are also used in signalling. It would be interesting to know whether similar individual names for musical instruments are reported in other areas of the continent and whether message transmission is associated with them.

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- ² De Hen, F. J.: Tamtams in Belgisch Kongo. Licentiaatsverhandeling; Universitair Instituut voor de overzeese gebieden.
- ³ Hulstaert, G.: Note sur les instruments de musique de l'Équateur. Brussels 1935. Revue Congo.



Slit drum or gong used for sending messages by the Luunda tribe along the upper tributary of the Congo River, the Luapula.

Village and section	Dimensions cm			Origin	Name	Translation	No.
	a	b	c				
BOKONDO 1							
1 Yamongbanga	157	134	61	Yaombole	<i>likungu lyaanamela feta</i>	The oyster-like shell-fish holds down river-nets	1
2 „	157	118	58	Bolikango	<i>bolongo betyebwa la lifindi bebanga keke</i>	The Bolongo-tree (covered with thorns) is not beaten with the hand for fear of the thorns	2
3 Likile	142	118	48	Bobuli	<i>elombo eyatungatunga</i>	The clan is dying out	3
4 Bokosa	134	113	74	Bolikango	<i>yoo sombe lifindi</i>	Dare to come and lay hands on us!	4
5 Lihua	99	91	30	Bobuli	<i>bobuo botyiti elombo</i>	Death is known in all villages	5
6 Bogula	150	125	63	Bokondo 1	<i>saku molome aongolya looko</i>	The male elephant waves his trunk about	6
7 Bombongo	152	124	61	Bokondo 1	<i>bobuo botyasya na mangene</i>	Death has no master	7
BONGBAKPA							
8 Bokpamu	152	124	63	Yaombole	<i>motuma inyaamonde keke elela gato</i>	The motuma-bird calls like a cock in the forest	8
YABIBI							
9 Bongili	137	113	43	Bolikango	<i>yoo sombe lifindi</i>	Dare to come and lay hands on us!	9
10 Yamongaliabe	122	97	43		<i>mangala titatitita toyaingi yamofilele fuko</i>	The chief people of Yabizi	10
11 Yamotumbe	113	91	36	owner	<i>ekelo titaabu abakama tabomo babii</i>	If we bale out the water of our spring we catch a lot of fish	11
BASAKANI							
12 Balembete	141	112	46	Baema	<i>likusongo litisi na soni na baiso</i>	The market is not shameful to the eyes	12
13 „	152	127	46	Baema	<i>alonga mesambo</i>	Leopard	13
14 Bafoya	132	109	43		<i>bolue</i>	Antelope (the wily one)	14
15 Bokondo	132	113	43	Bomboma	<i>lifindi ko limoi litiabuna ngungu ebita</i>	One arm alone cannot fight in war	15
16 Bokea	150	119	51	Baema	<i>motema fule</i>	Heart of anger	16
17 Bongbola	137	112	43	Basakani	<i>pela meindiatoko etie likilo</i>	River water never travels up-stream	17

Village and section	Dimensions cm			Origin	Name	Translation	No.
	a	b	c				
BAEMA							
18 Yamengwele	124	114	41		<i>bobuo botyasya na mangene</i>	Death has no master	18
19 Yasamwa	124	104	46	Baema	<i>lifomi limelengo</i>	The line of dancers	19
YANGOMU							
20 Yakita	127	79	43		<i>moto isosoiso</i>	A man of no worth	20
21 Yamangambo	142	114	48				21
22 Yamangwendua	160	132	56	owner	<i>louwe etyaiba hema be mwito egoo isosoiso</i>	Birds do not steal from a person who has no food.	22
23 Yafalafata	165	135	74	Yabibi	<i>fela mbutambuta</i>	Flood water spreads on every side	23
24 Bokema	168	135	63	Yaombole	<i>beela belambola</i>	They do something and then do the opposite	24
25 „	145	114	48	Baema	<i>kulokoko seena litaango</i>	The guinea-fowl sees palavers	25
26 „	112	89	43	Baonde	<i>moliki moautanta</i>	Python	26
YALISIH							
27 Yamonda	135	109	48	Bobuli	<i>bobuo botyese na mangene</i>	Death has no master	27
28 Yamokanda	145	121	51	Bandio	<i>belima metuka etyese na soni na baiso</i>	The abandoned village is not shameful to the eyes	28
29 Yakoka	157	130	56	owner	<i>iyatikala ko imoo</i>	There remain only a few	29
30 „	232	190	99	Yebisa	<i>motote etielumbo loboo</i>	No person lacks a palaver	30
YALoLo							
31 Yambaitota	133	109	50	Ilondo	<i>litina limete litielumbu bongangane</i>	The big tree bowl does not lack space	31
32 Yamuta	142	119	48		<i>mwano moyabiobela endande la mbili melongo</i>	The world changes—folks are jealous of his present strength	32
33 Yamakanda	125	104	43	Ilondo	<i>belima betue bebasie na soni na baiso</i>	The abandoned village is not shameful to the eyes	33
34 Yabelomba	164	136	66	Bandio	<i>libulo la litua libete a efulye o ekeputu na ngandi</i>	Owner of the country, son of the rain spirit	34
Yaisomandombo	(none)						

Village and section	Dimensions cm			Origin	Name	Translation	No.
	a	b	c				
YALo (continued)							
35 Yeuma	106	95	86	Ilondo	<i>lifindi lilome</i>	Right hand	35
Yambila	(none)						
36 Yasongolo	155	127	50	Baonga	<i>mokinda motuta ilombo</i>	Crushed manioc leaves (as in a mortar)	36
37 Yaisaba	84	69	31		<i>baito bamosombo moliendi esia</i>	People of the riverine clans	37
YALeMBA							
38 Yamoya	116	94	41	owner	<i>lombo longalaka ato</i>	The village square full of men	38
39 Yabita	170	138	62	Lokau	<i>ifefele malindiya</i>	The empty gourd cannot be made to sink in water	39
40 Yamotinda	142	117	58	Bokondo 2	<i>lifindi lilome</i>	Right hand	40
41 Yangonde	141	117	50	Baonga	<i>mongiangia</i>	A water bird (regarded as "chief of river-birds")	41
42 Yalofoli	150	125	50	Bokondo	<i>fela molindyabitoto heningo bebobuo oiya obe mangene</i>	The flood water dies down but it returns again	42
BANDIO							
43 Yalikongoi	168	131	62		<i>lifindi likula melenga oya loubele lotalya ngama obula kona libange</i>	The water-buck goes to the forest but he comes back to the river again	43
44 Bandiobapapa	139	116	46		<i>liitoi waokaka ete ekpome bato</i>	Do not let the ear hear what people say	44
45 "	138	113	45	Yebisa	<i>lua osumbe lifindi moto etibasi abo</i>	Come and lay hands on us; no-one is here	45
46 Yalingombo	112	93	37	Basakani	<i>likuku libwaka otibasina angembo ongalusa otitena likuku libwaka</i>	The big-bowled likuku-tree, if you do not have a sharp axe, you cannot cut it down	46
47 Bakama	120	95	43	owner	<i>toliya imatungeli</i>	We eat the last bits of food	47
48 "	142	116	47	owner	<i>lifindi lilome olibaka moongo anbe lifindi libali</i>	The right hand must not forget his helper the left hand	48

