
AFRICAN MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS IN KENYA

by

GRAHAM HYSLOP.

There are many African musical instruments scattered throughout Kenya. In some cases it appears that there will be nobody to carry on this tradition when the present exponent dies. This means that in a short time, some of the traditional instruments of this country will have been lost without trace. Because of this danger, traditional instrumentalists were invited to attend a Course at Jeanes School, the Colony's main centre for Adult Education, in September, 1958, in order that a careful study of these instruments might be made.

The reaction to this suggestion in one particular district was very lively. This was in Elgon Nyanza at the foot of Mount Elgon, on the Uganda border. The Secretary of the African District Council immediately organized a local festival of traditional instruments and this proved a great occasion, no less than ninety instrumentalists taking part. Fifteen of the best of these instrumentalists were chosen to attend the course. Elgon Nyanza is part of the Lake Victoria Province of Kenya, and the other four instrumentalists who attended the course also came from this area, three from a neighbouring district and one from Kisii country, south of the Kavirondo gulf.

While it was fully recognised that the traditional instrumentalists of Africa are normally professionals and earn their living by their art, it was not possible to pay fees during the course, either for recordings or for photographs. Because the musicians realised however that the whole purpose of the project was to attempt to rescue for posterity as much information as possible about their crafts and skills, they co-operated fully in the work of research which was done and a great deal of valuable material was collected. Comprehensive notes were made of the construction, tuning and playing of the instruments; with the help of the Department of Information photographs were taken and a short sound film in colour made; the Kenya Broadcasting Service made recordings and an assurance was given to the instrumentalists that these recordings would not be used for commercial purposes without their permission.

Instruments of all the three traditional categories of stringed, percussion and wind, were represented on the course.

STRINGED INSTRUMENTS

The stringed instruments varied in shape and size, in the number of strings used, and in the tuning. It is interesting to note that most of them were tuned in the baritone range. This is probably due mainly to the quality of string used traditionally and the system of tuning. The strings were commonly made from the leg tendons of cattle. This type of string will naturally be inadequate for the high tension required to produce a high note. The tuning devices of the stringed instruments also restrict the amount of tension possible. They are of two kinds. On some instruments the end of the string is wound round and round the frame many times to form a little knob and it is this which holds the string in the desired position. Another method used is a peg device, very much like the modern violin. Musically the tuning of these instruments is not at all inappropriate since the instrumentalists who play them and sing to them are invariably menfolk.

All the instruments make fascinating study but to take just one of those shown in the photograph of the stringed group, (P.00) that on the right is the 'Litungu' from Bugusu country in Elgon Nyanza. The framework is built up on a wooden bowl covered with giant lizard skin and it is this which provides the resonance. The overall length is nearly three feet. The strings are not made in the traditional way from the tendons of

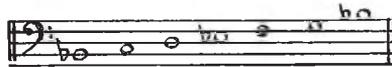


STRINGED INSTRUMENTS:

- (Top Left) *LITUNGU LYRE*.—This eight stringed instrument is used together with the *ESI-MANE* bells on a stick. Played horizontally on the ground. *Mukuria tribe*, Kisii District of Kenya. The bridge consists of small wooden strips held in position with lumps of bees wax.
- (Top Right) *LITUNGU LYRE*.—This seven stringed instrument is nearly 3 feet long and 1 foot across the top. The bowl covered with giant lizard skin is roughly 13 ins. by 9½ ins. *Bugusu tribe*.
- (Middle) *ADEUDEU*.—Two five stringed horizontal harps. The one on the left has a beautiful wooden bowl, the one on the right is an inferior instrument with a rough metal framed bowl. *Teso tribe* (Elgon Nyanza District of Kenya).
- (Front) *SIIRIRI LUTE*.—This instrument is played with a sisal bow. The overall length is 2 feet. The drum is 7 inches in diameter and 9 inches deep. *Bugusu tribe*.

cattle and it was assumed that they were commercial music strings but it was discovered that this was not the case. Maunda Waliaula, the expert maker and player of the 'Litungu' enjoyed the instrumentalists' course so much that he promised to make one of these instruments for the Colony Music and Drama Officer as a token of esteem. In the search for the strings for this instrument it emerged that he had been using tennis racket gut! This sounds unlikely material for a musical instrument but at the pitch required it produces a pleasant tone and is certainly an improvement on the original cattle tendon.

The tuning of the seven strings is interesting. There is of course no fixed pitch, there is no oboe to give them 'A'. The top and bottom notes shown here are B flat, but on another occasion the instrument was tuned to A flat. If the minstrel is in a merry mood he probably tends to pitch the instrument high, and if melancholy, the pitch no doubt falls. With regard to the notes of the scale between the octave, considerable humility is demanded with regard to scales found in African music. The last word on this matter has by no means been said, but the notes shown below are certainly no more than an approximation to the sounds produced. Incidentally when these instruments were recorded the first thing that was done was the recording of the tuning of the strings and these recordings provide an adequate check. From left to right the strings are tuned as follows:—



This of course represents the European diatonic scale with the seventh note missing.

These stringed instruments are seldom if ever played by themselves. The commonest use of the 'Litungu' seems to be that two minstrels play together. When the instrumental introduction has begun, one of them introduces the song, in speech rather than song and it is not until after this that the other will actually begin to sing, both of them playing on the 'Litungu' all the time. More often than not there is a simple percussion accompaniment provided by a small box on which sticks are struck. The player of this percussion instrument holds two sticks in each hand with which he taps out an appropriate rhythmic pattern. This instrument is obviously better for accompanying a stringed instrument than a drum, because it is much lighter, a drum would be much too heavy.

It will be noticed that there is a hole in several of the coverings of the resonating drums of these stringed instruments. When asked what was the reason for this, one of the instrumentalists said that these holes served a dual purpose—they let the sound out . . . and the pennies in!

PERCUSSION INSTRUMENTS

The main percussion instrument is of course the drum. It is interesting to discover that those drums brought to the course at Jeanes School were never known simply as 'drums', they all had their individual names. The drums in the photograph of the percussion group (see P.00) come from two different parts of Elgon Nyanza. The long drum 'Efumbu' and the two small drums 'Endonyi' come from Bugusu country and are played together by a team of three drummers. The square and round drums, both known as 'Atenesu' belong to the Teso people, and these too are played by three drummers, the round drum being shared by two of them, one playing with his hands on the larger end, the other beating with drum sticks on the smaller end. The ankle bells in the foreground of the photograph are used in conjunction with the square and round drums. All these drums are tuned by the simple process of standing them in the sun, or holding them in front of a fire, the heat in either case tightening the skin of the drum.

The best drum of all is the 'Etumbu', the long wooden one. It is beautiful to look at and produces a most mellow tone. The top is covered with giant lizard skin and the

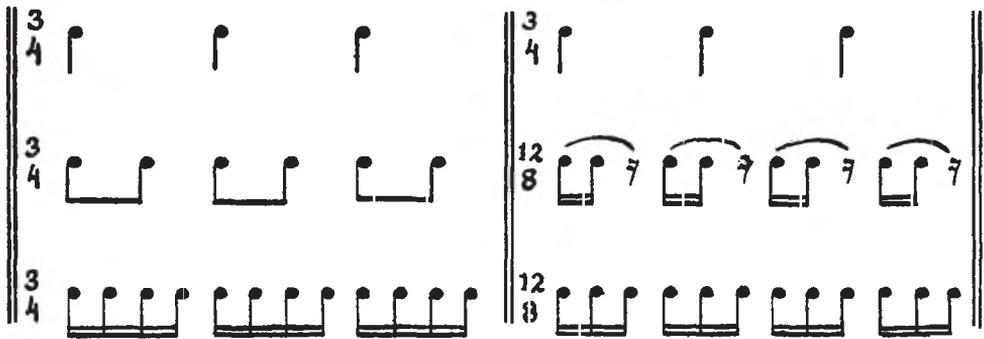


PERCUSSION INSTRUMENTS:

- (Top Left) *EMFUMBU DRUM*.—One end covered with giant lizard skin, the other end open. *Bugusu* tribe (Elgon Nyanza District of Kenya) overall length 2 feet 9½ ins.
- (Lower Left) *ENDONYI*.—Pair of metal cylindrical drums covered each end with ox-hide. *Bugusu* tribe. Length 10 inches, diameter 7¼ inches.
- (Mid Right) *ATENESU DRUM*.—Made from 4 gall. tin covered with ox hide top and bottom. *Teso* tribe (Elgon Nyanza District of Kenya).
- (Lower Right) *ATENESU DRUM*.—Made from bucket with the bottom knocked out. Covered top and bottom with ox-hide. *Teso* tribe.
- (Top Right) *KAYAMBA RATTLE*.—Made from two layers of reeds with seeds between. *Giriama* tribe Coastal District of Kenya.
- (Lower Left) *IBITURANI*.—Iron bells on stick used together with the Kisii *LITUNGU*. *Mukuria* tribe (Kisii District of Kenya). Longest bell 4 inches long.
- (Front) *ESIMANE*.—Ankle bells, used together with the Tesu *ATENESU* drums. They are about 2 inches long. *Teso* tribe but very common in other Districts.

other end is open. It was made by the present owner nearly forty years ago, just after the first World War — in 1919. The drummer's name is Silali and when asked his age, his colleagues answered for him and said 'He's eighty, if he's a day'. His grandfather was a drummer before him, as was his father, who taught him how to play. His two nephews, Ishmael and Tawayi play the two small 'Endonyi' and these add the lighter tone and higher pitch to the ensemble. These are played with one stick and held in the other hand.

The combination of rhythms which these three drummers produce is very intriguing. Tawayi with one of the small drums maintains a regular crotchet beat throughout. Ishmail with the other small drum divides this crotchet beat into quavers, and eighty-year old Silali on the long drum divides these quavers yet again into semi-quavers. This rhythmic pattern however is simply introductory and before very long interesting cross-rhythms are introduced. Tawayi continues with his crotchet beat, and although Silali goes on playing in semi-quavers, he breaks them up into groups of three instead of the normal grouping of four semi-quavers to a crotchet. Ishmail joins Silali in groups of three semi-quavers but he omits the third beat of the group. This means in fact that whereas all three drummers started off playing in $3/4$ time, when they introduce these complexities of rhythm, Ishmael and Silali change into $12/8$ time, while Tawayi persists in $3/4$ time. This means that the only strong beat which the drummers play together is the first beat of each bar. From time to time the drummers revert to the original simpler rhythm which gives a sense of 'free-wheeling'. The two rhythmic patterns can be written in the following way:—



WIND INSTRUMENTS

The wind instruments brought from Elgon Nyanza to the instrumentalists course were of two kinds, horns and flutes. One beautiful horn, probably from the Kudu, was over 3 feet six inches long. It was very old, having first belonged to the present owner's great-grandfather. There were two flutes both just over 18 inches long.

The best horn player was Kwerekho shown in the photograph. The horn he uses is made from two horns joined about two thirds from the narrow end. The narrower part of the horn is made from the "Ikhulo" horn but the wider end is part of a cow horn. The length of the instrument is about 2 feet three inches long. Kwerekho produces quite a varied melodic line by means of breath control and stopping the end of the horn. The breath control of this horn player is phenomenal, he never seems to stop to take a breath, the flow of music is as constant as that of a bag-pipe and he has obviously devised some simple storage system.

THE CHANGING SCENE

An interesting request was made by one instrumentalist during his course. He asked the Colony Music and Drama Officer to issue an edict forbidding the use of the guitar as this practice was one of the causes of the gradual disappearance of the traditional musical instruments of the country! It was certainly hoped that the publicity given to this course for traditional instrumentalists might do something to re-establish respect for their craft, since they represent ancient traditions and have spent many years learning and developing their skills. It is probably true on the other hand that the future of these instruments is partly bound up with the question as to whether or not their use can be adjusted to the changing social scene.

A great deal was learnt about the traditional African musical instruments of one part of Kenya during this recent course, and it is obvious that there is still much to learn. Consequently another similar course has already been planned to take place in 1959.