

MUSIC OF MY PEOPLE (II)

Dances in Barotseland

by

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Barotse are a nation. Everyone living in Barotseland calls himself a Mulozi although he may belong to one of very many tribes of Barotseland. Each of these tribes has its own peculiar language and customs, with Lozi only as a lingua franca. Writing on music or dances of such a heterogeneous people one must needs consider all the major and influential tribal groups. There are many dances in Barotseland, most of which are established only in one locality according to the predominant tribe. Thus we find *Siyemboka* and *Sipelu* are the main dances in Central Barotseland (i.e. Mongu and Senanga districts), while *Kayowe* is more popular in Kalabo district. In Mankoya district, where there are two main tribal groups, there are, accordingly, two main dances—*Chilunga* and *Lubwa*. These five dances are the main dances corresponding to the five main tribal groups—Lozi, Mbunda, Nkoya, Lubale and the Nyengo-Makoma. Keep these tribal groups in mind as you read on.

Our ancestors, the "Aluyi", who lived in Barotseland before the invasions of the Makololo and the Matabele and before the immigration of the Mbunda and Lubale, had their own dances. A few of these that have come down to us have been preserved pure and unadulterated in form and purpose. The *Ngomalume* which is danced by men only, and the *Liwale*, for women alone, are still danced on Royal occasions just as they were at their inception by our forefathers. Both of these dances are different from any other dances I know . . . there is no singing; instrumental music provides the necessary rhythm. The *Ngomalume* demands skilful co-ordination of steps and the abdominal movements. It is said to be a dance which no hungry man can dance effectively as it involves vigorous churning of the belly. Fat, heavy men dance better.

Besides these Royal and Ceremonial dances, the Aluyi had many delectative songs and dances such as *Liimba*, *Lishemba* and *Sipelu*. Of these *Sipelu* was and still is the most popular. As far as I know it is the only dance from the Aluyi that has counterparts everywhere among the tribes of Northern Rhodesia. It is like the *Somba* of the Bemba, *Chitelele* of the Nsenga and like the *Ching'ande* of the Tonga and Ila. In Barotseland itself there are three more dances which are, in fact, mere varieties of *Sipelu*—these are the *Muzemo* of the Totela, the *Kamunyerere* of the Nkoya, and the *Sbombe* of the Lubale. These are mainly evening entertainments, chiefly for young unmarried men and women as well as children of school age. In most of these a drum is used and dancers go round the drummer. In *Sipelu*, however, people stand in two parallel lines—one for each sex—facing one another. One or two pairs (a male and a female making a pair) dance at a time. No drum is used. Clapping and singing are the two essentials. Besides, real *Sipelu* fans usually wear calf rattles to guide their partners into steps.

Sipelu dance, though popular, is unfortunately moribund in some parts of the country where Christian influence is greatest. Restrictions and regulations have now been made against *Sipelu* on the grounds that it is not morally safe to let unmarried young men and women dance in places without villages throughout the night as usually is the case; that *Sipelu* made school children stay up too late to keep awake in classes. What is more, the whole dance as well as its songs is highly affective. As such it is feared that it may ruin the future lives of the innocent but rather gullible and tractable children who patronize the dance.

*Siyemboka*¹, by far the most popular and widespread dance, was brought in by the early

¹ Every morning at about 6.00 and every noon at about 12.00 before the time announcement there is a xylophone *Siyemboka* tune from F.B.C., Lusaka (African Service).

Mbunda immigrants. It is danced at beer parties, at ordinary festivals, and above all, at ceremonial occasions such as the *Mayobo*,² the *Kuomboka*,² and the girls' initiations. In fact nowadays the term *Siyemboka* connotes the girls' initiation ceremony because in all girls' initiation ceremonies *Siyemboka* is the last dance held on the day a girl comes into public as a fully grown woman worthy of marrying. As the people carouse throughout the preceding night, they dance *Siyemboka* non-stop. The dance is so important a part of the ceremony that people go on dancing while one or two men serve them with beer, the serving being preferential to whoever does the most to make the dance a success.

The drumming in the *Siyemboka* dance is highly elaborate. One man plays on two or three drums, each tuned to a different pitch, while another man augments with yet another drum which has the highest pitch, to complete a complex rhythmic pattern such as only the Lubale people have in Northern Rhodesia. The Mbunda have recently introduced into Barotseland a more appropriate *Siyemboka* drum called *Chingubu*, a four-in-one drum played by one man to give the effect of the above drum combination (I hope to deal with this when I write on musical instruments—meanwhile, suffice it to say *Chingubu* is a unique musical instrument and also that the Mbunda and Lubale have no equal in drumming).

Dancers (men, women and children) dance round the drummers anticlockwise. Dancing styles change now and then as new songs are composed, but drumming seems constant. Most dancers work their shoulders rhythmically but no suggestive or awkward body movements are allowed in this dance. The *Siyemboka* is now looked upon as the national dance. In 1954 an embarrassingly suggestive style was evolved whereby girls swung their buttocks riotously. No sooner had it attracted the teenagers than it was banned and deemed offensive by Superior Native Authority. If the South African *Patha-patha* were a *Siyemboka* style it would live only for a month at most.

In Kalabo district where the Nyengo, Mbowe, Liuwa and Makoma people live, the main dance is *Kayowe*. This dance is performed where and whenever *Siyemboka* would be danced; as such it is sometimes referred to as the *Siyemboka* of the Nyengo people. Although the basic rhythm is similar to that of *Siyemboka*, the overall effect is discernibly different. Three drums, each with a different pitch, are played by three different men. Dancers step alike according to the middle tone drum, while their shoulders are guided by the bass drum. *Kayowe* is essentially a shoulder dance (i.e. shoulders move more than any other part of the body). Dancers may dance standing upright or they may incline forward with their hands pressing on the knees. Occasionally, they may dance seated or kneeling, with their hands on the hips. Whatever position the dancers prefer, the essential part of the dance is the amazingly stereotyped rhythmic backward pressing of the shoulder blades. This is so important that a few well known *Kayowe* dancers, like Nanjeke,³ wear zebra manes on the shoulders to accentuate their shoulder movements. Besides wearing zebra manes dancers may wear a crown of feathers, and rows of calf rattles.

The Nkoya people, whose dance I am going to describe next, are talented singers. Unlike their Lubale neighbours, they do not sing in parts nor do they use more than four drums. However, their singing has one unique feature which, for lack of a better term, I shall call "narrative" singing. Most of their songs have no definite verses although they may have fixed refrains. Any person starting a song may and often does sandwich in a comic verse or two, calculated to challenge one of the many song leaders to a "song-duel" to see who will win the dance. The songs are about major historical events

² A ceremony where a man is chosen to take up his dead relative's name and responsibility is called *Mayobo*. *Kuomboka* is the moving of the valley people to the highland when the floods begin.

³ Nanjeke is our Royal dancer who dances at all important Royal occasions. He has a group of dancers with him, and a choir as well as his special drummers.

as well as oblivious misdemeanours, which only the singer himself had been able to observe.

The Nkoya's main dance, called *Lubwa* is the most graceful African dance I have ever seen. It is not as hurried and baffling as most of the African dances are. There is no jumping about nor are there any excited rhythmic body movements. All movements are deliberate, well-defined and graceful, at the rate of a two-step figure per second, equivalent to a slow walking pace. The Nkoya drumming is so enchanting that it has been made the Royal drumming. The Nkoya Royal Band of the Paramount Chief plays at specific times a day, according to the Chief's activities. When he eats it plays one tune. When he walks it brings a different tune—and it keeps on changing tunes and rhythmic patterns according to activities. It is this gentle, soothing, mellow perfection of the Nkoya drumming, coupled with graceful precision in dancing, that enhances and dignifies the *Lubwa* dance. The basic rhythmic pattern, however, is by no means a unique one; one finds it among other tribes of Central Africa, notably the Congo people.⁴

Still in Mankoya district is yet another interesting tribal dance, the "*Chilunga*" of the Lubale people. Backed by not less than four drums, all played by one individual, and by unusually animated three-part singing, *Chilunga* is more bacchanal than *Lubwa*. Baritone, alto and soprano mingle and merge above the thunder-like drumming, to give such singing as only the Mambwe tribe have. The dance styles are fascinating and involved. At the end of every song there is a chorus after which singing stops. Dancers dance to the complex drumming, and they literally dance themselves down until all are on their knees or actually squatting. In that position, more songs are sung; at the end of the chorus all dancers work themselves up until all are on their feet once more. Dancers often tie long pieces of cloth, such as bed sheets, round their waists. However, very few people other than the Lubale join in dancing *Chilunga* because it is highly suggestive. It is rather better left to the Lubale people who are naturally considered low.

People in Senanga district have evolved a dance which bears the name *Sipelu* but has nothing in common with that described before. It is a dance between *Siyemboka* and *Kayowe* and its dancers arrogantly refer to it as "the course", thereby implying that one needs a course in its styles, particularly the footwork. Shoulder movements are like those sighted before in *Kayowe*. The sole musical instrument for this dance is a xylophone.

Besides these, there are a few more dances that are worthy of note. The *Lilombola* dance, which came to Barotseland at the same time *Siyemboka* was introduced, is strictly for the Mbunda and Lubale people, danced on the day a girl's confinement starts, and also a week after. At no other time is *Chisho* (as it is sometimes called) danced, and for no other girls but the Mbunda and Lubale. *Manyanga*, yet another from the Mbunda people is interesting in one way. It is a sacred dance performed only at important funerals such as of headmen and great hunters (no *Manyanga* can be held unless the deceased was a hunter) and also after a big-game hunt.

Makishi dance, although entertaining people at all possible occasions especially during *Kuomboka* festival, was originally danced only during the Lubale initiation ceremonies of the boys (the Lubale and some sections of the Mbunda have circumcision ceremony when boys are between ten to fifteen. During this period they are kept away from villages until they are healed. At *Makishi* dance they are given food, money, etc., with which to feed the confined boys). *Makishi* dancers are said to have been dead and come from the graveyards directly at the sound of the people's drums, as such dancers masquerade and change their voices to avoid recognition.

Makwasha of the Kwangwa and Nkoya, and *Linjamba* also of the Kwangwa, are but novelty dances, as it were, worthy of only mentioning.

⁴ Tune to Radio Brazzaville just before the time announcements at 12.00 and also at the end of the musical interlude that follows the English news at about 12.25. There is a *kalimba* tune that sounds like a *Lubwa* tune.

This is just a rough grouping of localities for each dance. The actual extent for each dance is not so well defined but I hope this will give a good idea of dances in Barotseland. It may also serve to conclude with a chart showing parts of the country where each dance predominates and also the major musical instruments as well as the tribe closely connected with each.

SUMMARY OF DANCES IN BAROTSELAND¹

<i>Major Dances:</i>	<i>Tribe:</i>	<i>District:</i>	<i>Minimum Instruments:</i> ²
1. SIYEMBOKA	Mbunda, Lozi ³	All over, especially Mongu and Senanga.	<i>Chingubu</i> or three drums
2. KAYOWE	Nyengo, Liuwa, Makoma	Kalabo	3 drums
3. LUHWA	Nkoya	Mankoya	3 drums
4. CHILUNGA	Lubale	Mankoya	4 drums
5. SIPELU	Lozi	Mongu, Senanga	Clapping
<i>Varieties of Sipelu:</i>			
a. KAMUNYERERE	Nkoya	Mankoya	Clapping
b. SHOMBE ⁴	Lubale	Mankoya	Clapping
c. MUZEMO	Totela, Subia	Sesheke	1 drum, clapping
6. LINDANGA	For women alone all over the country, danced in all tribes, away from villages, when women instruct confined girls.		
<i>Minor Dances:</i>			
7. LILOMBOLA (Chisho)	Mbunda, Lubale	Mongu, Mankoya	3 drums
8. MANYANGA	Mbunda	Mbunda	3 drums and <i>ndamba</i>
9. MAKISHI	Lubale	Mongu, Mankoya	3 drums
10. SIPELU (course)	Lozi	Senanga	Xylophone
11. MAKWASHA	Kwangwa, Nkoya	Mongu, Mankoya	3 drums
12. LINJAMBA	Kwangwa	Mongu (highland)	3 drums

N.B.— ¹ This summary does not include dances dealt with in my previous article that are used by African doctors. In my description I have deliberately left out such dances as *Lindanga* and some Royal dances just because I have never watched them long enough.

² A xylophone can be used with drum combinations given in most of the dances except in few dances notably *Makishi*, *Chilunga* and *Manyanga*.

³ "Lozi" is used here in its narrow sense referring only to people living in Central Barotseland which include Kwangwa, Kwandi, Mbowe and a few mixed tribes.

⁴ *Shombe* is pronounced with a long "o" sound, such as in "saw".