

TONE AND MELODY IN A CONGOLESE POPULAR SONG

by

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The accession to power of Lieutenant-General Joseph D. Mobutu as President of the Congo Democratic Republic in November 1965 was followed by the appearance on the market of a popular song in Lingala, one of the *linguae francae* of the Republic. This song, emphasizing the presidential decision to take over control of the country for a period of five years to ensure peace by a strong military government, and so attempt to redress the economic situation, was diffused regularly over the national radio and became the "signature tune" used in connection with news bulletins throughout the early part of 1966. If it has not been heard so frequently recently, this may be because recent governmental changes, notably in the person of the prime minister, have rendered part of the song inapplicable to present-day conditions.

The object of the present brief note is to underline the remarkably close connection between the melody of the composition and the tonal patterns of the lingala words used.

The composer uses as his "nom d'artiste" the name of *Rochereau* and has a number of rumba records to his credit. He is currently director of the "African Fiesta Orchestra", a popular musical ensemble in Kinshasa, but I understand that he hails from the Kisangani area. In civil life he is known as Monsieur Pascal Tabou.

The libretto of the song is as follows. High tones are marked with an acute accent, low tones remaining unmarked (there are only two tonemes in Lingala).

Balbí te mbóka Congó etóndí na bato.

Batató, bamamá na bána bóbima libándá,

tóyókana, tóbongisa mbóka.

Cinq ans! Cinq ans! Mobútu akotómisa Congó.

Cinq ans! Mbúla ya mítáno (i), bísó tokoyókana.

Cinq ans! Cinq ans! Múlamba akokúmba gouvernement

Cinq ans! Mbúla ya mítáno, bísó tokoyókana.

A fairly literal translation of this would be:

They say that the town of Congo is full of people.

Fathers, mothers and children, come out into the open,

let us agree together, let us put the town right.

Five years! Five years! Mobutu will set up the Congo.

Five years! By the fifth year, we shall agree together.

Five years! Five years! Mulamba will carry the government.

Five years! By the fifth year, we shall agree together.

The instrumental accompaniment consists of two guitars and a rattle with a trumpet taking over the solo part from the vocalist towards the end of the recording. Voice and rhythm are linked in the following way:

the first guitar plays throughout the vocal section:

/ d: r! m: -/ d: r! m: -/ d: r! m: -/ etc.

The vocalist enters at the end of bar 4:

/⁴ : ! :d /⁵ m s f fr rf r /⁶ m m d d d - /

ba lobí te mbóka Congó etóndí na bato

After two more bars of guitar accompaniment, the vocalist enters again at the end of bar 9:

(i) The Lingala dialect used in the song is that commonly heard in Kinshasa where it has been much influenced by Kongo and other local languages. This is noticeable here in the particle *ya* which would be heard as *na* in Upper River areas.

^{/9} : l :d /¹⁰ m s m m f r f m /¹¹ f d d r m m - /
 ba tatá bamamá na bána bóbima libándá
^{/12} s l s s f /¹³ t, t, t, r d - d' /¹⁴ d't - l /¹⁵ l s - m /
 tó yókana tó bongisa mbóka 5 ans 5 ans Mo
^{/16} s m m m s m m f /¹⁷ s - -d' /¹⁸ d' t - l s /¹⁹ s l-l s m m t, t, /
 bútu akotómisa Co ngó 5 ans mbúla yamítáno bísó toko-
^{/20} r d d - ' /²¹ d't - l /²² l s - s /²³ m m m s m m f /²⁴ f s - d' /
 yóka na 5 ans 55 ans Mú lamba akokúmba gouvernement 5
^{/25} d' t - l s /²⁶ s l l s m m t, t, /²⁷ r d d - /
 ans mbúla yamítáno bísó toko yókana

It is clear from the above analysis that the tonal values of the Lingala libretto are respected by the melody, even though this letter is in European idiom and accompanied by instruments tuned to European musical scales. There is a gradual fall in pitch throughout the phrase, with the interval low-high in bar 4 bei g m-s whereas by bar 6 it has become d-m. The only cases where melody and tone seem to follow different patterns are:

- (a) the first word "balobi", which might be expected to have as its musical melody: d d m (or m m s) but has, in effect, d - m - s;
- (b) "batatá", at the beginning of phrase two with the same discrepancy;
- (c) "tókana" in bar 12 with melody s l s s instead of following the tonal pattern of l l s s.

Elsewhere there is complete agreement.

In a recent study of Congolese popular songs, Bwantsa-Kafunga shows that "in the song, the tones (some tones) are often deformed" (ii) and there is no doubt about the fact that many Congolese composers using Lingala and other tonal languages seem to take no account of the inherent tonal patterns in their libretti. It would be interesting, however, to compare the amount of respect shown for tonal patterns and the places of origin of the composers of these songs. Mr. Tabou, responsible for the song studied here, probably comes from the Upper River area where we have already noted that song melodies are little more than the sung tonal patterns of the words used. Composers from the Bakongo and other areas where tonal patterns play only a small role in semantic and grammatical differentiation of linguistic elements, seem to feel no restraint in imposing melodic patterns on Lingala words that are in direct contradiction to the tonal patterns of these linguistic elements as used by Upper-River speakers.

This popular song seems to be a confirmation, from an area where one might have expected the contrary, of the thesis that tonal patterns of spoken words are of fundamental importance in shaping the melody of traditional song. Any discussion of vocal music from the Upper Congo area that ignores the tonal values of the sung words is invalid.

(ii) Bwantsa-Kafunga S.P.: CONGO EN MUSIQUE. Lovanium, Kinshasa, 1965.