

MUSIC IN UGANDA

A Brief Report

by

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In the last five years the musical scene of Uganda has much changed. Since independence traditional music has been encouraged throughout the country and this has led to an increase in musical practice in some areas, particularly in those that have already been musical strongholds, i.e. Busoga, Acholi, etc. Traditional music is almost everywhere alive.

A pleasant surprise was our recent journey to Busoga, where we recorded several pan-pipe ensembles (*Enkwanzzi*) formed by rather young people in all sorts of social positions. (One excellent player and leader of a group turned out to be a bus conductor during day time). We also recorded an orchestra of eight gourd horns (*Amagwara*) near Kamuli. *Amagwara* have been recorded in the past by Hugh Tracey and I was extremely satisfied to see that such groups still exist. Among numerous songs we recorded a famous one called "*Waiswa mugudde*". This title was already recorded by Hugh Tracey in the fifties during his visit to Busoga.

Even rare Kisoga instruments are still being played, for example: *Musokolome*, the Kisoga equivalent of the *Sekitulege* (ground bow) of the Baganda. Only one song is known for this instrument.

The *Budongo* bands are as popular as ever. The music seems to have remained unchanged over many years. In dancing to the *Budongo*, however, some people have now adopted the movements of the Twist and other Western dances in addition to their traditional repertoire of dance movements. It is unlikely that the Twist fashion will last very long.

We made acquaintance with Mr. John Mwase (who is employed with "Heart Beat of Africa") at the Busoga District Council near Jinja. He was willing to go with us as interpreter into the villages. By profession a police musician, he is on the other hand deeply interested in traditional music and has already managed to learn some traditional instruments. Mr. Mwase proved to be a very helpful person. Thanks to him we were able to meet several musicians of the older generation and collect oral statements about the migration of musical instruments to Busoga. Mr. Kaja, 62, a virtuoso player of the lyre, who lives near Kamuli, gave us worthwhile information about the history of the lyre and the arrival of the *Budongo* in Southern Uganda.

The encouragement of traditional music and its popularisation through government offices must be welcomed by every student of African music, even if it has its drawbacks. At least some aspects of traditional music in Uganda seem to decline towards cheap entertainment for tourists, who rave through the country in zebra-striped buses and for whom Uganda dancing is probably nothing more than another sort of "National Park."

In the "official" versions of music and dancing, different tribes are often mixed up regardless of their musical culture and language-basis. There is a marked tendency towards "orchestras" in the style of Evaristo Muyinda's "Kiganda orchestra", which seems to become a kind of prototype of a National Orchestra.

Often such ensembles (consisting basically of *Amadinda*, fiddles, flutes and drums) are enlarged by instruments from elsewhere: for example pan-pipes and *Budongo* from

Busoga. Such detribalisation may apparently be advantageous from the political point of view, to accept it musically, however, requires a good amount of optimism.

To a certain extent the so-called "Heart Beat of Africa" — Uganda's National Dance Group, is an example of these trends. This group has already staged performances in Egypt, Canada and Russia, and will possibly go to Germany, Italy and other European countries this year. Although the performers stage quite remarkably genuine African music, the mixing up of entirely different musical cultures and the accumulation of too many instruments in *one* ensemble diminishes the artistic impact of this otherwise excellent group.

My former teacher in xylophone playing, Mr. Evaristo Muyinda is now in the "Heart Beat of Africa" too. I was a little disappointed when I met him again. Playing more for non-African audiences during the last years, one feels that this has obviously not been advantageous to him. Partly through my own publications about xylophone music and partly through local propaganda he has become so popular in and outside Uganda, that too many people now desire to learn *Amadinda*, *Akadinda*, *Emmanga* and other instruments from him. Evaristo Muyinda is quite experienced these days in teaching Europeans the playing techniques of Kiganda instruments. In addition he is a most distinguished musician, but for some time I have begun to feel that he is no more an objective source for ethnomusicological research. Eight years have passed since Evaristo Muyinda introduced me for the first time to the playing of Kiganda instruments. In the meanwhile studying Muyinda's music has become a fashion, and an easy one too.

One area in Uganda that would deserve extensive musical exploration is the north: Acholi, Alur, Madi, Lugwara, Kaka, etc. But very few students seem to have the courage to live for some months in these areas. The majority prefers living in Kampala or nearby — and as a consequence Evaristo Muyinda is the one whom they inevitably come across.

Most unfortunate is the destruction in the former kingdoms of Southern Uganda. The court music of Buganda, Bunyoro, Butoro, etc. does not exist anymore. In the course of an armed attack of the Uganda Army on the Kabaka's palace two years ago, the Kabaka's drums were burnt. The king fled to Burundi, from where he went to England. His recent book¹ written in exile describes what happened in Buganda (page 193) . . . "Among the sad news of who is dead, who is in prison and what is destroyed comes the confirmation that the Royal Drums are burnt. I saw this work begun and feared that it must have been completed. These drums, of which there are more than fifty, are the heart of Buganda, some of them hundreds of years old, as old as the Kabakaship. To touch them was a terrible offence, to look after them a great honour. A Prince is not a Prince of the Blood but a Prince of the Drum and his status is determined by which Drum. They all had separate names and significance and can never be replaced

Today the Kabaka's palace is the domicile of the Uganda Army. The court music has ceased to exist. The musicians went to their homes and are scattered all over Buganda. A few have found employment in other groups. Mr. Cooke from the Teachers' Training College at Kyambogo near Kampala, where some of the royal instruments have been reconstructed (*Entanga* and the large *Akadinda* of the Kabaka's palace) told me that the school was able to oblige one ex-player of the *Entanga* drums.

The situation in the other kingdoms is similar. The court music of the Omukama of Bunyoro, for example, does not exist anymore. Many recordings made by Hugh Tracey for the I.L.A.M. and by K. P. Wachsmann for the Uganda Museum fifteen to twenty year ago have become historical documents of irreplaceable value.

The value of traditional music and culture is now realized by many people in Uganda. Anyone who doubts this ought to spend one afternoon in the Uganda Museum. Never in the last nine years during my visits to Uganda have I seen so many visitors coming

¹ "Desecration of my Kingdom", Constable and Company Ltd. London, 1967.

every day. The Museum's band, originally created by K. P. Wachsmann is very popular among the citizens of Kampala and for many people the only chance of listening to traditional music from several parts of Uganda at one place.

Another institution in Uganda which deserves our utmost praise for what it has done for the preservation of Uganda's traditional music is the Uganda Foundation for the Blind. More than fourteen years have passed since the foundation started its work. In 1957 a Rural Training Centre for the Blind was opened at Salama, a small settlement south of the town Mukono. Very soon after its establishment a strange fact came to the observation of the field officers: most of the blind who come to Salama are gifted musicians and play one or more traditional instrument. Usually they bring their instruments with them from their homes all over Uganda.

With this surplus of traditional musicians in mind, the foundation decided as early as 1958 to form a Salama ensemble of African music for concerts. The *Blind Musicians of Salama* have become one of the most authentic groups of traditional music in Uganda. They give regular concerts and the present Superintendent of Salama, Mr. Ephraim Bisase, is doing a great work in encouraging the music of all tribes at his Centre. He plans to form an ensemble out of the best musicians who have been at Salama between 1958 and now in the hope of staging performances overseas.

Less brilliant is what is happening in the research field. As far as *present* musical research is concerned I had more expectations before returning to Uganda in November, 1967. Many students are, of course, interested in traditional music and could do very good work, but there is little hope for most of them to obtain effective training in musicology. The main problem seems to be transcription. I have had interesting experiences during lectures I gave at Makerere University, when we tried to do transcription exercises. There seems to be a general tendency in Uganda of misnotating additive rhythms as odd meters. An example might be the well-known Central African "standard pattern" 2 + 3 + 2 + 2 + 3, which yields a summary meter of 12 units. When the moment for transcribing came, most students wrote it down as five notes in a 7/4 — meter. Like this:

7/4 [X X . X X X .]

This should be an important hint for somebody who has to deal with transcriptions by Ugandans. It is a typical mistake and I understand now, why Joseph Kygambiddwa for example writes down most of his church compositions in meters such as 5/4 or 7/4. Although odd form numbers (for example 27 or 35) may occur in Kiganda music,² the employment of 5/4 or 7/4 meters is not a characteristic of music in Uganda. Probably what Kygambiddwa means is additive rhythms, but unfortunately he does not write them down correctly.

This is a regrettable situation, because more and more little music books are being produced in Uganda for schools and all claim, of course, to contain traditional music. On paper these songs often look like simple European folk melodies in the simplest rhythms. And hardly anything can hide this, even if barlines are omitted and one author claims that "African songs are in many ways different from European songs and these differences must be allowed for when transcribing them."³

When meeting the authors of such books and asking them to sing what they wrote down, it becomes clear that at least the Ugandans among them *know* how to sing them properly; then one realises that these little songs are much more complicated in rhythm and not so simple as they look on paper. The main trouble is indeed one of transcribing.

² Compare "Agenda n'omulungi azaawa" for *Amadinda* in G. Kubik: "Xylophone Playing in Southern Uganda", The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Vol. 94, Part 2, 1964, page 156.

³ "Twenty-four Songs of Uganda", compiled for use in Primary Schools by Peter Cooke, The National Institute of Education, Kampala, 1966.

This student generation in Uganda is keen to acquire the necessary tools for research in traditional music. Many of them would prefer to be fed with more "hardware" than a Conference on African Music. But there seems to be little effort made in this direction at present. In addition those few Ugandans who call themselves "musical experts" are often in a state of rivalry towards one another. Almost everybody not involved in Uganda's domestic musical affairs complains that it is nearly impossible to accomplish any work with them, because if you make a lecture or a radio programme with a "musical expert" the other one will be your enemy.