

CALL TO THE HUNT: THE ONE-NOTE XYLOPHONE OF THE DRC¹

by

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Introduction

“That is something we have researched for twenty years. If you can get us five or six used examples that would be a nice surprise.” (Maes 1934: 1)

With these enthusiastic words J. Maes accepted the news from Rev Fr. Roland about a curious musical instrument found in the Sanga territory: the *mbila* (Figure 1). The interest shown in this one-note instrument is easily explained, as in 1934 the Tervuren museum only possessed three examples of *mbila*, without any accompanying information. Maes’ request as chief conservator of the ethnographic section was met, and Roland sent four well documented examples of *mbila*.



Figure 1. Collection: MRAC (Musée Royal de l’Afrique Central) (Inv. N° MO.0.0.35842); Ethnic group: Sanga (DRC); Height: 38cm; Materials: calabash, resin, wood (*pterocarpus tinctorius*), agglomerated matter; Collector: Roland (in 1934); Maker: chief Lokotola Kabango (great hunter dec. at a great age c. 1900); Coll. at: Dipeta; Made at: a village on the Mofya River; Notes: In 1934 this *mbila* belonged to a *Yeke* named Kintambo. Photo by J. Van de Vyver © MRAC.

¹ This article was translated from French by Andrew Tracey.

Subsequently between 1935 and 1938 Maes recruited four other colonials working in the present-day provinces of Haut-Katanga and Haut-Lomami to collect specimens of these xylophones together with their relevant ethnographic details. These four were territorial administrators R. Marchal and F. Grévisse, assistant administrator G. A. Joset and Rev Fr. Tempels. A large part of the information we possess on the subject comes from the work of these two missionaries and three administrators. Some of their correspondence on the subject was published by O. Boone (1936: 121-122).

The *mbila* of Haut-Katanga, DRC

Roland and administrator Grévisse provided matching information on the use of *mbila* among the Sanga (Figure 1; Figure 2). The following, however, is based on the writings of Grévisse (1935: 1-4), which offers more detail. In his view the *mbila* is an instrument used only by brotherhoods of elephant hunters.² Society members played it on various occasions: When an elephant hunt was planned and the initiates were paying respects to the shades of deceased hunters, as well as to certain “hunting spirits” such as *Luwe* or *Kamwadi*; while the hunters were in camp in the bush; when an elephant had been killed, as the hunters brought the meat to the village and the head was being cooked; when a hunter had been killed by an animal, or died more peacefully at home; as non-fermented beer was poured on the grave of a deceased hunter during certain ceremonies; and when libations of beer were made by the hunting brotherhoods.

On these occasions the *mbila* was not played solo. When it was heard in the hunters’ camps it was accompanied by *tuzonge* (struck axe heads) and *masonkolo* (rattles) and during elephant head cooking it was played together with *ditumba*, *kayando* and *misenkene* drums, *tuzonge* and *masonkolo*.³

Grévisse and Roland (1934: 3) stress the special near-sacred character of the *mbila* among the Sanga. It was in no way an instrument for trivial occasions. For Roland, its sound reinforced the hunter’s determination and boldness (1936: 1). For his part, Grévisse added that the *mbila* was brought out at full moon and coated with *mpemba* (kaolin) and that this practice probably confirms a connection between the *mbila* and the ancestral cult held on certain full moon nights or on the appearance of the new moon. The use of the one-key xylophone is also attested among other cultures of Haut-Katanga such as the Zela (Figure 3), the Shila (Figure 4) and the Nwenshi (Figure 5). The Zela used it during hunting dances (Tempels 1936: 1). Among the Shila of Moero, the ensemble included two *mbila* and several drums (Tempels 1937: 4).

The playing technique of the *mbila* is fairly similar among the Zela and Sanga. The right hand strikes the bar with a mallet, while the left hand covers and uncovers the aperture of the resonator in order to vary the sound. The Shila musician, on the other hand, blocked the aperture continually with the left hand, but moved his fingers up or down to obtain a louder or a lighter sound. The *mbila* was usually placed on the player’s

² Other dangerous big game, big cats, buffalo, were also involved. Grévisse records only elephant hunting, however.

³ That is, according to Grévisse. According to Roland the *mbila* was played solo.



Figure 2. Collection: MRAC (Inv. N° MO.0.0.36081); Ethnic group: Sanga (DRC); Height: 31cm; Materials: calabash, resin, wood (*pterocarpus angolensis*); Collector: Roland (in 1935); Coll. at: Nguba region; Notes: The Sanga name for the single bar of the xylophone is *kipanji*. Photo by J. Van de Vyver © MRAC.



Figure 3. Collection: MRAC (Inv. N° MO.0.0.37104); Ethnic group: Zela (DRC); Height: 47cm; Materials: calabash, resin, woods (*pterocarpus angolensis*); Collector: Tempels (in 1936); Coll. at: Kiona-Zini chieftom; Notes: incised motifs on the bar are rare for one-note xylophones. Also the Fowler Museum at UCLA keeps a most atypical sample (inv. N° X86.1903) which contains, on its key, a small carved head in a “Lubaoïd” style. Photo by J. Van de Vyver © MRAC.

left knee so that the bar would be about perpendicular to the ground. Zela musicians would sometimes hold the instrument against their chest.



Figure 4. Collection: MRAC (Inv. N° MO.0.0.37947); Ethnic group: Shila (DRC); Height: 33cm; Materials: calabash, wood (*pterocarpus angolensis*); Collector: Tempels (in 1937); Coll. at: Kapeshi (7km north of Lukonzolwa); Notes: Tempels collected three *mbila* at Kapeshi. One of them had not been made at this village but had been brought from the Luba. Photo by J. Van de Vyver © MRAC.



Figure 5. Collection: MRAC (Inv. N° MO.0.0.37108); Ethnic group: Nwenshi (DRC); Height: 34cm; Materials: calabash, wood (*pterocarpus angolensis*); Collector: R. Marchal (in 1936); Coll. at: Sampwe region, chief Kalera (Kalera chiefdom). Photo by J. Van de Vyver © MRAC.

The *didimbadimba* of Haut-Lomami and Lomami



Figure 6. Collection: MRAC (Inv. N° MO.0.0.36224); Ethnic group: southern Luba (DRC); Height: 34cm; Materials: calabash, resin, wood (*pterocarpus sp.*), agglomerated matter; Collector: Tempels (in 1935); Coll. at: Luabo region. Photo by J. Van de Vyver © MRAC.

Among the central and southern Luba the one-note xylophone is known as *didimbadimba* (pl. *madimbadimba*) (Figure 6). In the Luabo region it was used in professional hunters' bush camps during hunts for big game. When an animal was killed and brought to camp, hunting songs were sung and the *didimbadimba* was sounded (Tempels 1935: 1-2). The hunters also played *didimbadimba* in the villages for dances as the beer was prepared or as the game was brought in. These village dances lasted from dusk to dawn and included other instruments such as drums and rattles. *Madimbadimba* were found equally further north among the central Luba in the Kamina, Mato and Kabongo areas (Figure 7 and Figure 8), as well as among the “northern” Luba⁴ in the Kabinda territory and the Kisengwa area (Joset 1935: 1). On the basis of information from the Belgian composer Knosp,⁵ Joset confirms the use of *madimbadimba* in these regions for hunting dances.

In the 1970s Gansemans was able to meet seven old hunters of the *buyanga*⁶ association at Sungu village (central Luba), from whom he obtained certain

⁴ Although Joset (1935: 1) does not specify the exact group, this is likely to have been Luba-Lubengule.

⁵ Knosp conducted musicological research in DRC in 1934 and 1935.

⁶ An important hunting brotherhood, which had already practically disappeared from Luba country when Gansemans did his research.



Figure 7. Ethnic group: central Luba (DRC); Height: 45cm; Materials: calabash, resin, wood (*coelocaryon botryoides*); Collector: G. A. Joset (in 1936); Coll. at: Kabongo region; Notes: This *didimbadimba* has a cross-shaped hole on its resonator. This detail can be seen on at least one other example of a Luba one-note xylophone. In writings on the Luba no mention has ever been made of a mirliton, and this example shows no trace of any previous attachment. Photo by J. Van de Vyver © MRAC.



Figure 8. Photo by Joset (1934); Taken at: Kabongo (central Luba); Titled: "Instruments used during hunting dances"; Notes: Apart from the *madimbadimba*, *disakai* basket rattles can be seen. © MRAC.

information confirming Joset's and Tempels' data (Ganseman 1980: 39-41). He added that the xylophone took part in ceremonies taking place before and after a hunting party and was never played solo. It was accompanied by *ditumba* (skin drum), *nkumvi* (trapezoidal slit drum), *kyondo* (cylindrical slit drum), *dikwakasa* (scraper) and *ngyela*⁷ (board zither). Music of the "buyanga orchestra" was also recorded from the Gandajika region (western Luba). Apart from hunting songs, it seems that among the Luba, *didimbadimba* took part beside *nkumvi* and *ditumba* in the *kutomboka* investiture dance. Gansemans agrees with Knosp, who affirms the use of several *madimbadimba* made in different sizes to give a complete scale. Further, he illustrates this practice with recent, non-traditional examples of a one-note xylophone accompanying catholic and protestant ceremonies. The playing technique of *didimbadimba* is fairly similar to that noted for the Sanga *mbila* (Ganseman 1980: 9). Tempels mentions a different playing position whose occurrence is difficult to establish, where the musician sits with the instrument between his knees (Tempels 1935: 1-2).

One-note xylophones outside the DRC

Up to now we have considered the *mbila* by means of examples from the diverse cultures of the DRC. But this first inventory is hardly enough to approach the question of the origin and diffusion of this distinctive instrument. Several sources, both ancient and recent, reveal its existence in N. Rhodesia, now Zambia, and Nyasaland, now Malawi and in the interests of comparison with the above, I will now present the information that we have on those instruments.

In 1911/12 the Swedish ethnologist von Rosen collected two examples of one-note xylophones in N. Rhodesia (von Rosen 1916: 344, 417). The first came from the Bisa (Figure 9), the second from the Lenje (Figure 10). These people knew them as *mbira*; they used them when someone died or game had been caught and was being cooked (p.345). This data gathered by von Rosen is confirmed by the scant information concerning a one-key xylophone that was collected by Melland among the Bemba or the Bisa residing in the Mpika area of Zambia prior to 1911 (Stannus 1920: 38).

The *mbira/limba* of Zambia

The instrument known as *limba* was played after hunters had killed a hippo.⁸ As Andrew

⁷ *Dikwakasa*, *didimbadimba*, *lushiba* (whistle) and *ngyela* are instruments reserved for *buyanga* hunters (Ganseman 1978: 60-61).

⁸ We have no information on the particular playing technique in Zambia, but we know that the Bisa example collected by Von Rosen was accompanied by a mallet, an important point, because according to Stannus the instrument collected by Melland does not seem to have used one. This statement should be taken with caution, as the mallet seems to be an essential accessory to the one-note xylophone, whether in Congo, Zambia or Malawi. In fact Stannus' hypothesis is founded on the fact that the *limba* from Mpika district does not show any trace of gum on its bar (Stannus 1920: 39). And yet, as mallet heads are generally oozing with this material, it seems strange not to find some on the bar. Nevertheless we can confirm that not all one-note xylophone beater heads are covered with this resinous gum (see Figure 1). Stannus very likely based his statement on a *limba* he collected in Malawi.

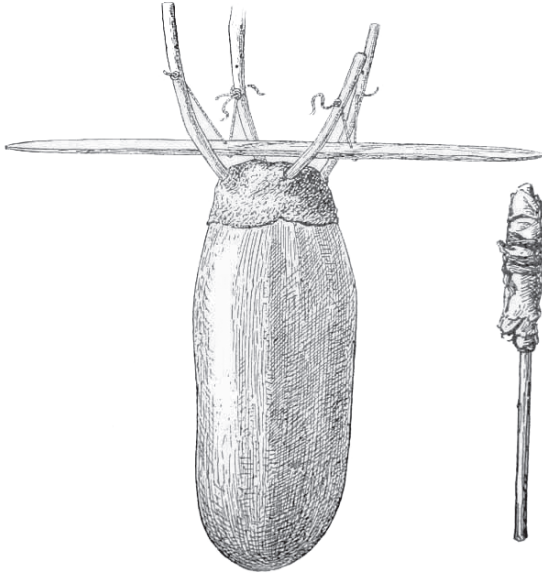


Figure 9. Image from: Von Rosen 1916, Fig.249-250; Ethnic group: Bisa (Zambia); Height: 60cm (xylophone), 29.5cm (mallet); Collector: E. Von Rosen (between 1911 and 1912).

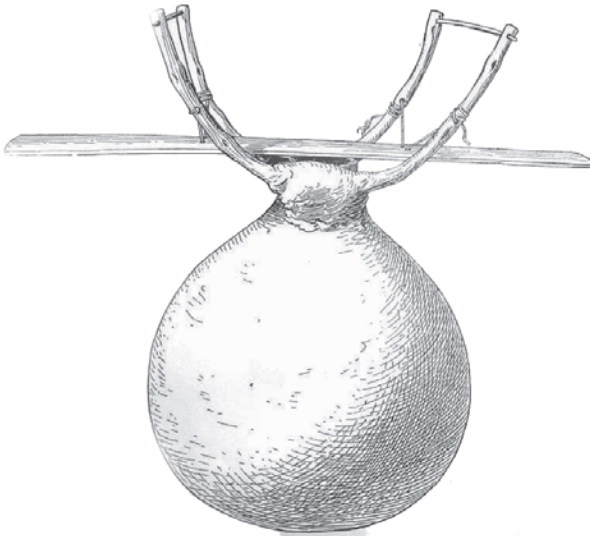


Figure 10. Image from: Von Rosen 1916, fig. 340; Ethnic group: Lenje (Zambia); Height: 46cm; Collector: Von Rosen (between 1911 and 1912); Notes: If the drawing can be trusted, note that the bows which support the bar are fixed with 'agglutinated matter' which does not cover the whole neck of the calabash. This method is seen on the Luba examples collected by Joset (see figure 7).



Figure 11. Image from: Blacking & Apthorpe 1965: 1; Taken at; Cikundu village (Nsenga, Zambia); Titled: “Jasi Njovu and Zangose Lungu play together at Cikundu”; Notes: Note the mirliton on the belly of Jasi Njovu’s instrument. In the light of the preceding examples it is interesting to note the greater breadth of the bars of these two *limba*.

Tracey has brought to our attention (pers. comm.), the *limba* was observed in the early 1960s among the Nsenga of the Petauke region (Zambia). In this culture, it seems to have been played in a roughly identical manner to that previously described for the Zela. It was used together with different drums, amongst which was the friction drum *kalilaumba*, to accompany hunting songs. It was also found with the same ensemble in songs linked with beer drinking (Blacking & Apthorpe 1965: 7-8). This being so, the Nsenga *limba* is distinct in some aspects from those described above, namely the Nsenga instrument possessed a mirliton on the calabash, a technical detail which we have not observed on any example in the Musée Royal de l’Afrique Centrale. Further, it happens that the *limba* was played by musicians. One of them, Zangose Lungu, played *limba* with her husband and their duo seems to have been much appreciated by ‘beer song’ lovers at that time (Figure 11). This use of the *limba* by women may be of recent evolution, as was the presence of *limba* in accompanying secular beer songs. To follow this idea, one imagines that Nsenga hunters initially attached ritual significance to beer, as this has been noted among the Sanga in DRC. The declining role of traditional hunting in Nsenga society perhaps led *limba* musicians to adapt to new drinking clients more accustomed to bars than to hunting rites.

The *limba* of Malawi

Around 1912, Stannus bought a one-note xylophone known as *limba* which was very similar to the Sanga *mbila*. It belonged to a Nyanja hunter who lived in a village between

Zomba and Lake Chilwa (Figure 12). This man used it only for hunting activities. He kept one in each village near where he went hunting, and said that playing the instrument in a village attracted waterbuck (*kobus ellipsiprymnus*) and drove away other antelopes. The hunter could then go out and track this favourite game without difficulty (Stannus 1920: 37). The instrument could also accompany hunters' songs and dances. Still according to Stannus, the instrument, which sounded more like a drum than a xylophone, was played in the following way. The right hand struck the bar with a mallet while the left hand was inserted into the hole in the calabash and withdrawn with a sliding movement in order to produce varying sounds. It is also probable that the *limba* among the Nyanja was used at hunters' funerals. I base this on the information supplied by Ankermann (1901), who shows in his work a *limba* from the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin (Figure 13) which had been collected from the Manganja (a neighbouring group of the Nyanja) and was described as a *totentrommel* (drum of the dead).

Reflections on the diffusion of one-note xylophones

Through the examples touched on so far we have established that one-note xylophones, whether from Zambia, DRC or Malawi, shared common features. These depend not only on the evident formal aspects but also, notably, on the similar usage and playing technique from one region and culture to another. Hence it seems legitimate to enquire about the possible family links which could unite the *limba*, *mbira*, *didimbadimba* and *mbila*.

It seems probable that the presence of the one-note xylophone in the Congo region is explained by cultural implantation from the south. For instance we have shown that the instrument maintains a link with hunters, that certain old hunting dance traditions of Zambian origin such as *kimbwela* exist among the Sanga (Grévisse 1935: 2), that the Luba *buyanga* brotherhood for which it is played also exists in Zambia among the Lenje and Bisa who know the instrument (Ganseman 1980: 41), and lastly that recent research on the costumes of certain hunting masquerades which once flourished in the great lakes region of Lualaba has shown resemblances with some Chewa masks of Malawi (Volper 2009: 112).

On the briefly presented basis of these facts, the hypothesis is thus reinforced that one-note xylophones arrived in southeast Katanga by way of Zambian or Malawian cultures. This poses the next question: what caused the dispersion? One can imagine that it was linked to the spread of hunters' societies. It should be remembered that during the 19th century one of the important Arab-Swahili trade networks linking with the Indian Ocean coast (Kilwa port, Zanzibar Island) passed via the region of Lake Nyasa as far as the Sanga territory. Now, the Arab-Swahili network rested above all on the trade in ivory and slaves. It is conceivable that this commerce depended on men who were skilled at big game hunting (elephant and hippo), and proved to be good mercenaries. Thus it can be envisaged that the Arab-Swahili caravans incorporated professional hunters.⁹ It is likely

⁹ According to Roland, it was also via these Arabisés that the *dizeze* board zither came from the east coast via Zambia to Sanga country (Roland 1934: 5). This instrument, (known in Malawi and Tanzania as *bangwe*) also exists among the Luba, with an added calabash resonator, and is known as *nyela*. Let us recall that, like the *didimbadimba*, it was strictly reserved for *buyanga* among the

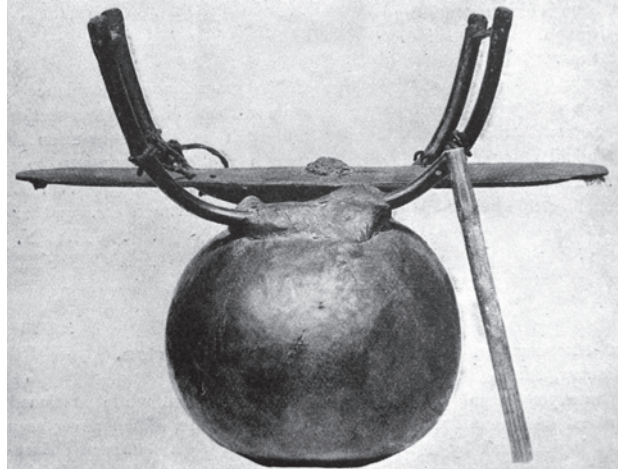


Figure 12. Image from: Stannus 1920: 38; Ethnic group: Nyanja (Malawi); Collector: Stannus (about 1912); Coll. at: Zomba region; Notes: These two examples from Malawi (Figs.11 & 12) have a special feature, atypical on a xylophone, a ball of resin at the centre of the bar. This modifies the sound and, as mentioned by A. Tracey (pers. comm), lowers its pitch, a method commonly used on drum skins in Malawi and Zambia.

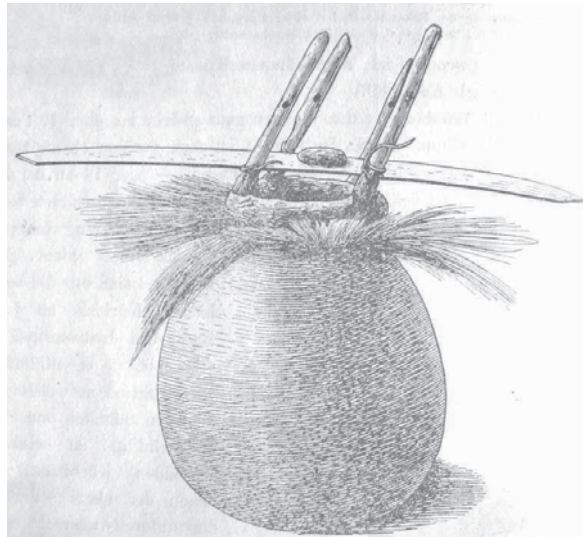


Figure 13. Image from: Ankermann 1901: 74; Collection : Museum für Volkerkunde, Berlin (Inv. N° III E 3229); Height: 54cm; Ethnic group: Manganja (Malawi); Notes: The corolla of hair which surrounds the instrument's neck is also found on an ancient sample kept at the MRAC (MO.0.0.3917) for which no collection information is known.

Luba (Ganseman 1978: 112). On the other hand, this was not the case among the *Sanga*. The latest research would also permit a possible role for the Pygmies, recognised by their neighbours as great hunters, who are found in two important diffusion zones of the one-note xylophone: the extended regions of Lakes Bangweolo (Zambia) and Moero (DRC).

that it was these who brought certain hunting rites into the southeast Congo, including the use of the one-note xylophone. This is all the more plausible because strong cultural links exist between Zambian and Malawian cultures (e.g. Bemba and Chewa) and the Luba of Katanga, which go back well before the big trade networks were established. Since the importance of these networks is in question, one can also enquire into the role played by the Yeke emperor M'siri in the spread of the one-note xylophone. Even if we believe that M'siri effectively contributed to the spread and prestige of traditional hunting brotherhoods, we do not imagine that he was behind the spread of the *mbila* or *didimbadimba* in south eastern Congo. In fact Roland's aged Sanga informants insisted that the *mbila* was played well before the arrival of the Yeke (Roland 1934: 3). This being said, it must yet be acknowledged that the Yeke had a role in the musical history of Katanga. It was by their intervention that the large *madimba* xylophone of the Luba made its appearance in the Sanga region. Conversely, it was very likely through the Sanga that the Yeke knew the *mbila*. At the present state of research, nor does it seem any more opportune to make a link between the spread of the one-note xylophone and the powerful Lunda empire of Kazembe which nonetheless kept up relations with the "one-note xylophone people" such as the Bisa (Wilson 1972: 579). Indeed, Gansemans' research has shown that the Lunda, like the Tshokwe elsewhere, did not know the one-note xylophone (Gansemans 1980: 41). On the other hand, the Lunda probably contributed to the spread of the large trapezoidal slit drum *kikumvi* among the Sanga and Yeke. This drum, called *kumvi* by the Luba, could be played at the same time as the *didimbadimba*.

Conclusion

In this brief study we have seen the possibilities of historic-artistic, musicological and ethnographic research in the field of the musical instruments of southeast DRC. As we have seen in the case of the one-note xylophone, this kind of study can prove both fascinating and diversified; it can lead the seeker well beyond his own research field. Understandably, this short presentation has no pretention to being immutable. Besides, the *mbila* would not be the only possible subject of study; in a similar class would be the well-known *sanza* 'thumb-piano', which was certainly present among several groups in Haut-Katanga such as the Lomotwa, Lamba and Kaonde, albeit with technical, formal or musical differences according to origin. Whatever the subject chosen, it is important to remember that the knowledge and appreciation of "traditional" instruments both ancient and modern by future generations will inevitably be in the hands of those who have kept them in use, and of those who have studied and recorded the facts about them. I will add in conclusion that neither the profession nor the period when these collectors worked had any influence whatever on the high quality of the documentation they succeeded in producing.

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