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Rhythmic and Melodic Variations in Traditional African Music and Dance: Mongo's Bobongo Culture

Apollinaire Anakesa Kululuka, Marc Jeannin

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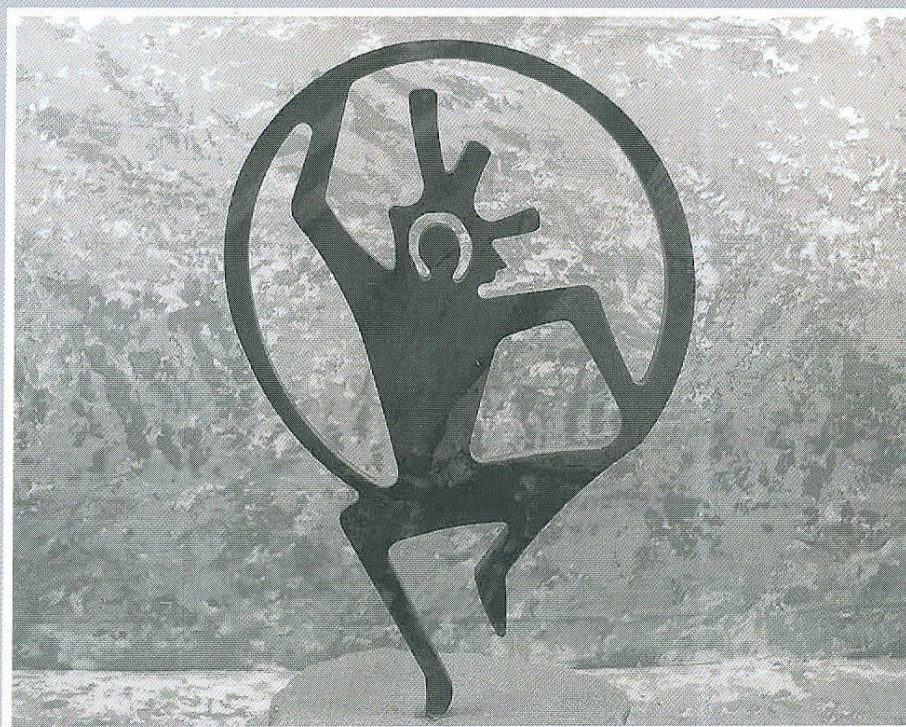
“Rhythmic and Melodic Variations in Traditional African Music and Dance: Mongo’s *Bobongo* Culture”, pp. 73-88
Apollinaire Anakesa and Marc Jeannin

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CONTENTS

**Music, Languages and Dance:
The Articulation of Structures and
Systems**

Articles

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|----|
| Marc Jeannin | Organizational Structures in Language and Music . . . | 5 |
| Sofia Barreto and Eva Ordóñez Flores | Dance and Music in Canarian <i>Malagueñas</i> | 17 |
| Eva Ordóñez Flores | Dance Improvisation Rules and Practice in the <i>Cuadro Flamenco</i> | 33 |
| Eva Ordóñez Flores and Marc Jeannin | Metrical and Rhythmic Interpretations in <i>Cante Flamenco</i> | 49 |
| Sofia Barreto | Venezuelan Carnival Songs: Singing <i>Calipso</i> in El Callao | 63 |
| Apollinaire Anakesa and Marc Jeannin | Rhythmic and Melodic Variations in Traditional African Music and Dance: Mongo's <i>Bobongo</i> Culture | 73 |
| Carl Gombrich | Expressions of Inexpressible Truths: Attempts at Descriptions of Mystical and Musical Experiences . . . | 89 |

Book Reviews (Helena Simonett, ed.)

- | | | |
|-------------|--|-----|
| Barry Shank | Fabian Holt, <i>Genre in Popular Music</i> | 107 |
|-------------|--|-----|

Kathleen J. Van Buren	Sylvia A. Nannyonga-Tamusuza, <i>Baakisimba: Gender in the Music and Dance of the Baganda People of Uganda</i>	109
Carol Muller	Gregory Barz, <i>Singing for Life: HIV/AIDS and Music in Uganda</i>	112
Zoila Mendoza	Heidi Feldman, <i>Black Rhythms of Peru: Reviving African Musical Heritage in the Black Pacific</i>	114
Edward O. Henry	Martin Clayton, <i>Music, Time and Place: Essays in Comparative Musicology</i>	117
Barley Norton	Nathan Hesselink, <i>P'ungmul: South Korean Drumming and Dance</i>	120
Chan E. Park	Keith Howard, ed., <i>Korean Pop Music: Riding the Wave</i>	122
Svanibor Pettan	Anna Czekanowska, Ursula Hemetek, Gerda Lechleitner and Inna Naroditskaya, eds., <i>Manifold Identities: Studies on Music and Minorities</i>	124

Recording Reviews (Dan Bendrups, ed.)

Robin Ryan	Review Essay: Sweet Sounds of a Sugar Town	129
------------	--	-----

About the Contributors	137
------------------------	-----------	-----

<i>the world of music</i>	141
---------------------------	-----------	-----

Abstract

Music is a vital expression in African people's lives, often characterising their specific cultural background. Many rituals and dances are performed according to the rhythms and melodies of traditional music. In the North of the Democratic Republic of Congo, a group of Bantu peoples called Mongo, whose culture offers a rich artistic diversity, live in an area surrounded by the immense Congo River and protected by the dense equatorial forest. Amongst this ethnic group, the Ekonda people practise a traditional rite named Bobongo. This ritual ceremony is particularly remarkable as it combines sang with dance in the forest of a spectacular show which is authentic to their culture. Dancers and singers are specially trained to perform this rite, and chants and dances are accompanied by a series of acrobatics carried out with discipline and control. The result of this mixture of artistic expression through sounds, words, rhythms, melodies and bodily gestures, cannot leave one indifferent, for it is highly emotional. Being refined and sophisticated it sings of life and praises the deeds of heroes, calls to mind images of the forest and nature, and, through the narrative of fables and stories, reflects the desire of the human mind to pursue its quest to contemplate abstract notions. Its style incites introspection. Coupling chants with dances, it preaches a model of equilibrium. Singing, accompanied by percussion instruments, zithers, cries or hand clapping, is apparently developed in total freedom. Appearing simple at first the performance becomes increasingly complex and words, music and dance fuse together: The authors examine the ritual musical and choreographic parameters of Bobongo according to an organisational model deriving from its performance and culture. This article attempts to define the fundamental characteristics—the articulation of structures and systems—of African music and dance through reference to Mongo's Bobongo culture. It deals with the form and context of the artistic realization of these characteristics and looks at the factors that contribute to their intermingling.

In the North of the Democratic Republic of Congo, a tribe of Bantu origin, called Mongo, lives in a zone encircled by the loop that is formed by the large Congo River and protected by dense equatorial forest¹. This people's culture offers an artistic variety that is of great value, with all kinds of vocal and choreographic forms. Among those forms, the Ekonda ethnic group practises one of the last ancestral rites still in existence called *Bobongo*² It is a particularly remarkable show for it brings together singular vocal lines as well as spectacular dances which require especially trained and skilled singers and dancers. Indeed, they actually perform a series of songs and dances, punctuated with various acrobatics that are carried out with perfect order and rigour. *Bobongo*, through dance and music, echoes an aesthetic idealism, which perpetuates traditional and ancestral knowledge that conveys, at the same time, cultural values and sacred forms of worship. The goal of our study principally lies in depicting and analysing the ritual, musical and choreographic parameters of *Bobongo*, and the organisational model of its spectacle and underlying culture. Furthermore we attempt to define the fundamental characteristics of each semiotic system-music and dance-as well as their operational invariants. Finally, we give an account of the forms and the contextual aspects of their realization, and also interpret the elements on which their interrelationship and interaction are based.

1. Background to *Bobongo*

It appears that Ekondas from die Democratic Republic of Congo can be divided into two communities: the first consists of Twas (or Batwa pygmies), the second of Bahutus (or Baotos), the Twas' Bantu masters.³ The Twas live in symbiosis with these Bahutus in the immense basin located on left bank of the Congo River, in the area between the Maïndombe and Tumba lakes. In that area, the people of the first community are in charge of hunting, gathering and fishing, while those of the second primarily devote themselves to handicrafts, as well as to rearing and to cultivating. Their social organization is patriarchal and patrilocal. In addition to their original territory, where a third of their villages have a *Bobongo* band at their disposal, other sets have been created in the capital Kinshasa, such as Ekonda Bernadette, a group founded by a woman bearing the same name. It is important to mention that originally none of these groups were

mixed: before the first half of the twentieth century there were only sets of men or sets of women arranged according to age (on one side the men and boys and on the other women and girls).⁴ In the present period though, *Bobongo* is performed by mixed groups (including men, women, boys and girls). All of them perform music and dance with great vitality, expressing both individual and collective creativity and talent, often with rather singular humour. It can be added that the *Bobongo* performed by Twas is famous for its very energetic style which distinguishes it from the much more hieratic one of Bahutus.

Bobongo is a complete art which is at the same time a rite and a festival spectacle but also an aggregate of polyphonic songs and dances.⁵ Songs and dances are conceived as a whole. Lokonda—the language of the Ekonda people—does not have a terminology that explicitly distinguishes them, as is also the case for almost all sub-Saharan languages. Besides, it may be mentioned in passing that this question of classification relates more directly to local conceptions of life and of cosmology rather than being a mere linguistic identification. Initially, *Bobongo* was a double ritual: either it marked the passing of a late patriarch or the mourning of a member of the community. As a funerary ritual, it obeyed the same basic rules as for the majority of the rites of the same kind that can be observed amongst various ethnic groups in southern Saharan Africa. It was a spectacular festive ceremony where various choreographies rhymed with multiple vocal forms often performed in combination with an instrumental accompaniment. However, in recent decades, *Bobongo* is no longer only related to communication with the metaphysical universe, but also to communication with the living. Consequently, having deep ancestral roots, it has become a major artistic benchmark characterising the Ekondas' cultural identity, and also that of Mongos more widely. As far as music is concerned, and from a general point of view, it can be said that *Bobongo* is a polyphonic musical genre in which out-of-phase exchanges and repetitions are very typical. The combination of thirds and seconds generally ends up in unisons, and at a metrical level, there is a particular use of ternary and binary rhythms to create complex musical measures.⁶ Those musical structures are combined with elaborated dances within a specific setting.

2. The Setting of *Bobongo*

In general, *Bobongo* is structurally produced by two groups. Placed backstage, the first is made up of a choir with a very variable number of female or male singers. It can amount to as many as twenty individuals in large-scale performances. Within the group, some singers make rattles (*isanga*) oscillate while others strike calabashes (*njeke*). The choir is accompanied by a drum made with a laced skin (*lomonda*). There are generally two or three drums, which are tuned to different pitches. The drum player is often assisted by another person marking the rhythm with a stick right in the middle of one of the drums. Six to ten people, singing and dancing, form the second group. Among them, two or four solo singers alternate their interventions, each one responding to the other. Even though practically all the members of this last group decorate their legs with little spherical bells (*elepo*), fixed on their ankles, the majority of them also hold traditional brooms (*kikombo*) made with stems of palm tree branches. They use two instruments, a drum with a slit of small size (*ikookolé*) and a pair of long scrapers (*bekwasa*). The former is used not only for marking rhythm for certain acrobatic parts and indicating their variations, but also to communicate coded messages or announce changes of texts. The latter is carried by another person, singing and dancing, and is mainly used for marking rhythm: it is formed from the end of a dried palm tree stem that is hollowed out and split in order to form a hole with a small diameter on the higher part and where the side of each opening is indented to be used as a scraper. The bodies of the two instruments, like those of their players, are speckled with constellations of white kaolin (see Figs. 1-3).

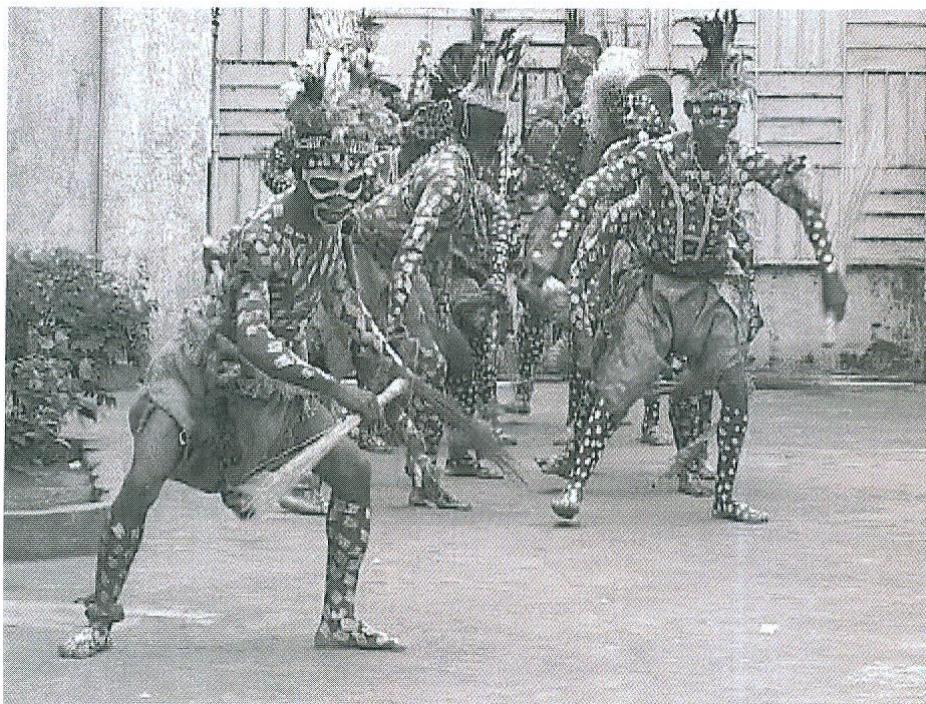


Fig. 1. Ekondas singing and dancing, holding kikombo (brooms) (photo: A. Anakesa).

It is also important to indicate that whereas the musical instruments in question are used above all to support songs and dances musically, at the same time they deliver dynamic emphasis and vitality which brings effervescence to a performance or ceremony. In that way spectators can easily participate in the performance, carried away by the music which freely encourages them to perform some dance steps. During the performance, the troupe is led out by the main soloist (called *nyangiobongo*), who is elected by the members of the group and the notables of the village. He is more than a genuine conductor: he is the chief who designs the show, and organises the linking of texts, as well as songs and dances. Apart from being the main soloist, he is also a gifted and learned improviser who knows all about the aspects of tradition and culture. Furthermore, he has a very keen sense of music and poetry, and also a great memory which allows him to master a large and varied musical, literary and choreographic repertoire, of which, besides, he mainly is the composer. Other soloists assist him in his functions. With their help, he prepares, advises and frames the physical exercises of the dancers. The *Bobongo* dance is a crucial test for which each protagonist must prepare *effectively*. Such is the degree of competitiveness between various groups that each *Bobongo* unit seeks to raise the standard of its village and to defend the prestige of its lineage. *Bobongo* performances thus constitute opportunities to challenge a rival group and give concrete expression to competitions



Fig. 2. Ekonda holding a bekwasa (pair of scrapers) (photo: A. Anakesa).



Fig. 3. An Ekonda holding an ikookolé (slit drum) (photo: A. Anakesa).

where the opponent may be mocked uninhibitedly, and even compelled to levee to the jeers of the crowd when the quality of the performance is less good than the one of its adversary. From musical and choreographic points of view, the various protagonists involved in this performance excel in imagination and originality. This is also shown in the musical ornaments as well as in the design of costumes, which are made on the performers' very body. Men and women are naked to the waist although the latter sometimes wear bras in raffia or modern fabrics. Men, both dancing and singing, are decorated with white kaolin speckles over their body. It should be added that white represents the colour of death, but it is especially a propitiatory sign, a symbol of purity. Their waist is girdled with loincloths in raffia. The women's bodies, on the other hand, are coated with *ngola* (a kind of red clay that is obtained through a mixture of oils and red sap and clay) and occasionally with some speckles of white kaolin on their bellies. Red colour refers to blood, procreation, life and offspring of which woman is the symbol. Men also carry mottled animal skins, generally symbolising predators and strength; they wear headdresses in raffia, pearls, slit river shells, feathers and fur.

3. Structures of *Bobongo* Performance

The structure of the performance can be divided into two main parts. The first is called *Bobongo* during which songs as well as declamations prevail over dance. The second one, *Iyaya*, basically corresponds to a primarily choreographic meeting in which various typical dances follow one another. Here are the main elements of the traditional organisation of *Bobongo* at a spatial and temporal level (Figure 4).

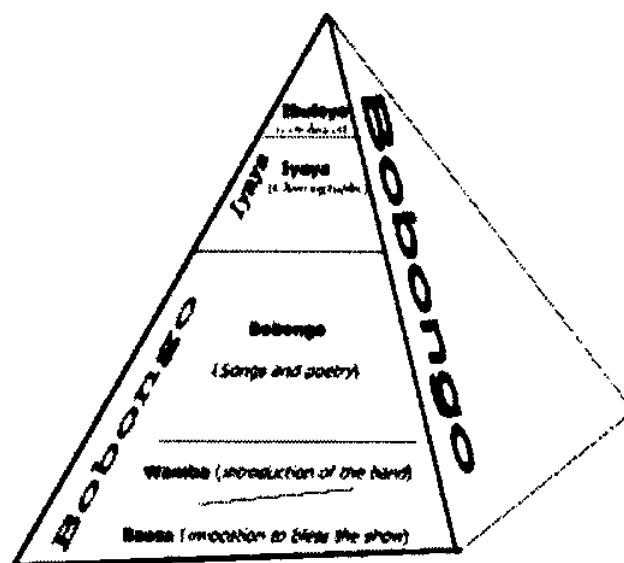


Fig. 4. Pyramidal representation of the phases of *Bobongo*.

The show, as shown by the pyramidal delineation in Figure 4, is temporally subdivided into four major phases which are linked as follows:

1st phase: Baasa and Wamba

Baasa deals with the invocation of geniuses and provides a link to *Wamba* during which, initially, the group arises, boasts its merits and defends its honour, and then it proceeds to narrate various tales, such as historical proverbs, stories, quotations, metaphors and poems.

2nd phase: Bobongo (songs and poetry)

The second part, which is the central part and the musical core of *Bobongo* performance, grants importance to songs and poetical declamations; it corresponds to the development of *Bobongo*.

3rd phase: Iyaya (choreographic part)

This phase primarily deals with lifting dances—dancers lifted up by each other—supported by rhythmic songs with instrumental accompaniment. During this phase, one or more solo dancers emerge from the stage. They alternatively leave the group, before joining it again, with performances that are at the same time displays of virtuosity and of very great buffoonery.

4th phase: Ibuleyo (conclusion)

The name of this segment is that of a kind of wooden scaffolding, equipped with moving parts that are in fact wooden nacelles of various forms, with panels which are able to slip along the beams. By this means, acrobats' can be horizontally swivelled or rocked, or vertically thrown up in the air by the others, to be caught just before they reach ground level. The mechanism of the *ibuleyo* is always kept secret until the very last moment, exactly when the scaffolding builder cuts the liana which maintains the balance and stability of its construction. The public awaits this moment with much interest. The final moments of the *Bobongo* spectacle offer a singular and kaleidoscopic lifting event: some dancers are either perched at the top of a human pyramid that they hastily form or are installed in a kind of gondola at the top of that scaffolding structure which can be as high as ten metres. Acrobats, at the top of this human pyramid, find themselves indeed thrown in the air, and then suddenly caught while they fall at approximately one metre above the ground level and then horizontally rocked to and fro.

The *Bobongo* show may last for some hours according to its situation and circumstances. The *Bobongo* ritual for mourning, for example, begins in the evening before 10 p.m. and does not end until 6 or 7 a.m. the following day. At an artistic level, the situation of arduous and deep-rooted competition, or rivalry, between various *Bobongo* groups maintains a constant zeal among performers, which contributes to the development of a musical language with a renewed form and style. From this viewpoint, the *nyangiobongo* reconsiders, for each show, the components of its performance to best adapt it to the particular circumstances. This perpetual artistic enrichment relates to the textual content of narrations, the polyphonic topics and structures of songs, the various choreographic aspects as well as the final mechanism of the *ibuleyo*.

5. Musical and Choreographic Structures of *Bobongo*

From a musical and choreographic point of view, songs and dances are entirely overlaid and interlinked in *Bobongo*. In this show, music is above all song, therefore a verbal message through poetry and aestheticism. This musical and linguistic association expresses the mysteries of ritual and inspires texts dealing with love. Furthermore, it brings comfort and consolation. Songs are organised in polyphony or heterophony in two, three or even four parts. This polyvocality is structured according to a responsorial or antiphonal style: two parts answer or oppose one another, with an interplay of questions and answers between the soloists and choir. Certain songs are performed solo. During the development of musical speech, the ensemble intervenes on a harmonic basis with an ostinato passage with both instrumental and vocal elements. Very often, this ostinato may be improvised. In addition to polyvocality, the use of polyrhythmic components with asymmetrical rhythms is a constant (see Appendix 1). This exceptional plurivocal art is, besides, accompanied by an instrumental group (drums with skin, drums with a slit, rattles, scrapers and little bells, not to mention handclaps and cries emitted by protagonists). In addition to that, those songs, like their corresponding dances, constitute important instruments of transmission, conservation and description of the *Mongos*'s ancestral traditional cultures.

The main topics of *Bobongo* are invocations to spirits, moral counsel, genealogies, self-criticisms, invitations, answers, lullabies, proverbs, sayings and tales. Each particular performance displays specific variations that are relevant to various and particular

circumstances: rituals, ceremonials, historical events, entertainment and artistic representations. At this choreographic level, various balletic scenarios are interpreted by characters given quite precise roles, connecting displacements, jumps, pirouettes, mime and all kinds of synchronised movements that are rhythmically accompanied by the vigorous rhythms of the instruments and of the polyphony songs. However, there is still room for improvisation.

Also based on an acrobatic technique of the head and neck, fascinating facial expressions and a very jerky play of the shoulders and feet, *Bobongo* dances are performed to rhythms that are in mm vibrant and graceful, and which imitate all kinds of self-evident gestures (for example, the imitation of an animal or even the appearance of a dead person). The choreographic composition has a structured scenario comprising an opening, a development and an end. Like songs, dances follow various patterns varying from the couplet | refrain scenes with die repetition of basic figures and the change of others, variations of the basic topic thus modifying essential gestures, as well as “random scenes” founded on improvisation and chance between dancers, and adapted to the scenic space and specific circumstances of a given performance.

The basic choreographic structure corresponds to vivid and significant fixed theoretical elements—sometimes resulting from phases of improvisation—so as to end up with the construction of a meaningful gestural sequence, whereas die elements of improvisation concern the spontaneous creative talent of dancers (referring to a collective improvisation). This kind of improvisation draws on the fundamentals of movement: time, space, energy and the body (its weight and support). It brings into play fluidity and flexibility. During this collective structural choreographic composition (see Fig. 5), various factors come into play from the multiplicity of patterns developed by dancers, and govern their relations (see Fig. 6). Among these factors, we find the following:

Entries and exits of the groups and sub-groups done by:

- *gathering* (one or more dancers gradually joining the group that is already on stage)
- *eleasting/catching up* (a dancer or a solo sub-group or trio temporarily leaving the group and then rejoining it)
- *slipping* (one or more dancers come on stage while others go off without any transition)

Relations of musical patterns are sung by dancing performers in:

- *canons, unisons or counterpoints*

Relations of space are realized by performers dancing and singing in:

- *solo, duet, bio, or other groups, and with various geometrical positioning of performers* (forming a circle [Fig. 7], one line, two or more parallel rows [Fig. 8], or using the space between two rows, etc.)

Relations of interactions between performers which relate to:

- *gestural exchanges, stunts and acrobatics*

Figure 5 shows some manners of structuring the choreographic composition of *Bobongo*:

	Transposition	Repetition	Accumulation	Inversion	Complexity
Theoretical patterns	Choosing a sequence carried out in the scene “songs and poetry” and repeating it again on the air within another scene	Carrying out the same movement or sequence several times with the same energy	Adding a movement to the preceding one, etc. (movements can be identical but larger and larger or different)	Realizing a movement and then carrying it out backwards (that can also be applied to a whole sequence)	Rendering movements more complex by playing on the components of movement, separately or jointly
Example	A turn of two feet becomes a turn on the buttocks (on the ground), and a jumped turn (in the air)	Going / going left becomes, for example, one walk of four steps if one repeats the sequence twice	Raising the elbow; then raising the elbow and passing one hand in front of the face; then raising the elbow and passing one hand in front of the face and lowering the arm	Going forward two steps becomes moving back two steps. A sequence towards the right becomes a sequence towards the left	A turn on two feet becomes a double turn on one foot. Balance on one flat foot becomes balance on half points.
Interest	Allows the creation of variations within scenes	Reinforces the presence of a movement or sequence	Announces or introduces a new movement	Reinforces the idea of development	Reveals a level of practice

Fig. 5. Structures of *Bobongo* choreographic composition.

	Contrast	Variety	Balance	Symmetry / Asymmetry
Rules	Essential duality of anything. Factors are opposed at a binary level	Instead of opposing two arguments (contrast), one makes them play with one another (juxtaposition), by changing the form of movements, space, time and energy	Proportions of formal units between them (methods of treatment, length of sentences, periods). Optimal proportions specific to each type of figure (topic, logic)	In general, symmetry refers to the Right and Left orientation
Example	One movement downwards can contrast with one movement upwards (spatial factors). A tonic energy can contrast with a slow tempo (temporal factors)	If one wants to vary spatial dimensions, the selected movement can be made upwards, downwards, towards the Right, the Left, the Diagonal, small, large, etc.	The development must be structured according to the selected topic (if the performance is based on a specific theme, the soloist has to respect its structure without improvising too much)	A movement on the Left that one reproduces on the Right.
Interest	Contrast makes it possible to surprise the public. If not enough contrast: boredom. If too much contrast: the thread of any arguments is lost.	Variety allows the public to be captivated. If not enough monotony, repetitive. If too much variety: the thread of any argument is lost.	If too much balance: too structured, national. If not enough: chaos.	Symmetry gives an impression of balance, of stability. Asymmetry gives more dynamism by contrasting with theoretical symmetries.

Fig. 6. Practical rules related to *Bobongo choreographic structures*.

6. Conclusion

Accompanied by percussion instruments, *Bobongo* singing and dancing offers a beautiful example of the polyphonic and choreographic art of central Africa, with its communication between singing and dancing soloists accompanied by a choir with splendid voices and remarkable dancing skills. The polyphony that results from its music is representative of an artistic genre which, whatever culture the listener belongs to, stands out as much by its immediate obviousness as by its evocative power. It carries words well beyond language and causes, in the audience's hearts, an intense emotion. Refined and complex, *Bobongo* singe life and comments on it, praises the high qualities of its heroes, and evokes the landscape of the forest, in particular through various fables or the representation of human thought in the search for the absolute. It is carried out in a style which, more than any other, evokes contemplations.



Fig. 7. Ekonda performers forming a circle (photo: A. Anakesa).



Fig. 8. Ekonda performers forming two parallel rows (photo: A. Anakesa).

This particular association of words, music and dance, constitutes, moreover, a balanced model. Its songs, assisted by some percussion, zithers, cries or handclaps, are developed with complete freedom and a fantastic power of improvisation that nevertheless obeys underlying musical and choreographic structures. Although they appear simple at the beginning, *Bobongo* musical structures intermingle with choreographic ones and gradually become more and more complex. Thus their sonorous matter, rigorously built up and inextricably linked to body gestures and spatial elements, makes various parts intertwine, in polyphony and polyrhythmy, and even in heterophony.

Notes

1 The Mongo people comprise several ethnic groups: Ekonda, Kela, Kutshu, Mbole, Mongo, Ngandu, Nkundo, Songomono, Tetela. Among those groups, a certain number of them (about 300,000) are descended from Pygmies, and are called Twas. Ethnically speaking, Mongos, who are patrilinear, live side-by-side in the South with matrilinear communities. Being foresters, fishermen and even hunters, Ekondas do not have any centralized political organization. The settling of Mongos in their present territories is relatively recent, and most probably results from a long migration spread over several centuries, whose starting point would be a region in the North-East, perhaps the High Ituri, the High Uele or even the Great Lakes area.

2 According to information that Apollinaire Anakesa obtained from the Twa community, Itetele was the inventor of *Bobongo*.

3 Twas are intermingled with Bahutus to such an extent that no distinction can be made between what actually belongs to the former and what they might have taken from or brought to the latter. Although the two groups live in symbiosis, and ail belong to the same clan, they are far from being on an equal basis. Under this regime, every Twa is subjected to a Bahutu—who becomes his *nkolo*—to whom he owes various services: the supplying of game, the reclaiming of new terrains in the forest, and jobs of every sort. In return, a *nkolo* takes care of his Twas vital needs, gives him tools and pays his dowry (if he marries). Twas' lodgings are always kept at a certain distance from the village. Over the last few decades, the personal situation of Twas has nevertheless improved. A good many of them have obtained their autonomy by cultivating their own land or by hiring out their services to forest work.

4 According to the Ekonda community, Lokangu lo Nsembe, an Ekonda from the village of Iboko, shaped a feminine version of *Bobongo*, imitating the one performed by men.

5 For Ekonda people, music and dance are conceived as a verbal message having poetic strength and aesthetic grace. The various genres of those messages are meant to entertain but also to perform rituals.

6 In this part songs are secondary and are used to accompany dancers and spur them on.

Appendix 1. Transcription of *Bobongo* Performance

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a Bobongo performance. It consists of several systems of music, each with a vocal line and an accompaniment line. The lyrics are written in a Bantu language, likely Ndebele or Zulu, and are interspersed with musical notation. The score is written in a staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The lyrics are as follows:

Bo- yi- lo pa- pa bo- yi- lo mba- la mi- ngyo a- ngy- la be- nde- le bi- tu- mwa e

yi- lo ma bo- yi- lo mba- la mi- ngyo a- ngy- la be- nde- le bi- tu- mwa e

yi- lo pa- pa bo- yi- lo mba- la mi- ngyo a- ngy- la be- nde- le bi- tu- mwa e

ma- ngye lo- ka- u Bo- mi- u lo- ngye- ka e M. lo- te a ngye- ya Na- la- ngye- ngye- lo o Bo

hi- me ye ngye o Ba ngye- la e o Bo yi- lo ma bo- yi- lo mba- la mi-

nggo a - ngg-la be-nde-ke bi-tu-mura e

hadih idan

Bo-yi-lo pa-pa bo-yi-lo mba-la mi-

nggo a - ngg-la be-nde-ke bi-tu-mura e

hadih idan

ki-y di-ko-ma Ne ba-l la-si o Ba ho-ka e-nou-ma Ba mpi-ma wo-nde o bo

hadih idan

ko-lo-ko-nou-ma Ba u-ha wo-nde o Na- wa nka-u Ba-nou-ngo nko-ngo o Ba-

yi-lo ma bo-yi-lo mba-la mi nggo a - ngg-la be-nde-ke bi-tu-mura e

hadih idan

yi-lo pa-pa Bo-yi-lo mba-la mi- nggo a - ngg-la be-nde-ke bi-tu-mura e

hadih idan

I-lo-ndo-lo ha-ngo I un-nti-le na-ko o A

app u-ny-ba te-ndo-bi-ti-ta-mu-e

ko-to e-ka-ngo A-nyo-ko wo ha-ux u A-nyo-la mu-ux Na un-lu na-mu o Lo

haktet idem

ny-be-bi na-ma ne un-tua ma-nyo yo Lo-

haktet idem

ny-mbe-bi na-ma ne un-kua ma-nyo yo ne un-kua ma-nyo yo

Ngoi — yo —

no un-kua ma-nyo yo Lo ny-mbe-bi na-ma ne un-kua ma-nyo yo LE-

Ngoi — yo — Ngoi — yo —

ngam-bu-le nae-ma-re un-kua ma-nge' yo' no un-kua ma-nge' yo'

Ngei - yo Ngei - yo

hachal
vachal

no un-kua ma-nge' yo' ngam-bu-le nae-ma-re un-kua ma-nge' yo'

hachal, vachal
Tambour en fonte

no un-kua ma-nge' yo' Ngei - yo

Ngei - yo Ngei - yo
rit. rall.

hachal
vachal
Tambour en fonte
Tambour à peau

Transcription: A. Anakesa.