



(LYRCD 7157)

**MUSIC OF THE RAIN FOREST PYGMIES
OF THE NORTH-EAST CONGO (Zaire)
Recorded in The Ituri rain forest by Colin M. Turnbull**

The north-eastern corner of the Congo is covered by the dense tropical rain-forest known as the Ituri. Between the forest's easternmost fringe, however, and the string of lakes that runs from north to south, is a narrow strip of gently rolling grasslands. It was from the grassland country that the farming people came, driven towards the forest by more powerful tribes who took their land. For tribes like the Lese, of Sudanic origins, there was no escape they were driven right into the heart of the forest, where they encountered the nomadic pygmy hunters, the Mbuti. They came to rely heavily on the Mbuti for help and in economic exchange of forest for farm produce. The Bera and the Nyari were more fortunate in being able to settle in the narrow strip of eastern grassland. They too, have dealings with the pygmies, but they are less frequent and less vital.

The first half of the recordings offers examples of the music of those pygmies living closest to the Lese. Even though the first two songs are not strictly traditional, they are unmistakably pygmy. The whole musical style and form is something quite special, and is found among the Mbuti, throughout the Ituri. The only time they deviate is when in the villages, singing any old kind of song that they think will please these singularly unmusical (to pygmaen ears) people. The rest are traditional in the oldest style.

The rest of the recording shows that the villagers are not quite as unmusical as the pygmies hold. The Lese, being forced into close contact with the pygmies, show the heavy influence pygmy music has had upon them, particularly on track 7. The music of the Nyari and Bera, however, is much freer of influence. Perhaps the most noticeable difference is that the music of the pygmies is vocal, while that of the villagers relies on instrumental accompaniment.

The single recording of the Twa pygmoids, from south of the Ituri, in the Kivu Mountains, is a final example of acculturation at its most unexpected. With the help of a Watussi friend, I located some of the Twa. After pleading for a really old song, one of the great religious songs of the past, an ancient lady finally agreed, but with hesitation, saying it was so old and highly sacred. The surprising result is on Track 6.

TRACKS

1. ELEPHANT-HUNTING SONG. Elephant hunting is close to the heart of the pygmies, who find it an irresistible challenge, an almost mystical experience. It is difficult to trace the origin of this distinctive type of song, but it is closest to the sacred molimo songs of the Mbuti, sung in times of great crisis, particularly death. Sometimes, indeed, these elephant hunting songs are almost indistinguishable from molimo songs. This song, then might be an act of atonement, a death festival for the elephant. The split sticks tapped together in accompaniment are likewise normally reserved for religious occasions. Thunder, heard in the distance, is likely to come late any afternoon, just when singing is taking place, bringing it to an end.

2. LEAF CARRYING SONG. The villagers are afraid of the forest and reluctant to enter it, and so rely heavily on the pygmies, not only for meat, but also for raw materials for their every-day needs. The large mongongo leaves are used to roof houses, and the girls in this song were recorded as they stopped to rest on their way into a village from their forest home, each bearing a large bundle of mongongo. Each girl sings a few improvised and generally naughty lines about her boy friend, while the others listen and giggle, joining in with a mighty contralto chorus that breaks off sharply. At the point every girl puts her head to one side to listen for the echo, however distant.

1. AGBA'A. This song was recorded in a Lese village, but sung and danced by pygmies. It is just about as acculturated as the pygmies in the Ituri can get, except when they choose to mime the villagers. One of the few returns the villagers get from their reluctant trade partners is entertainment such as this. Even the villager admits that as singer and dancer the pygmies have no peers. The songs sung by pygmies in the village, and the dances, are mere horse-play designed partly to amuse the villagers and keep them happy with a singularly bad economic bargain, but also to conceal the true forest songs, which have strong religious content, forming a mystical communion between the pygmies and the world around them.

3. HUNTING SONG. The singers use both the clear ringing rhythm sticks and the softer split sticks heard in the Elephant Song. Handclaps combine to complicate this dual rhythm with snatches of solo over a chorus that is at times both in canon and sung in fivoet, where each singer takes one note only, and by hooting it at the appropriate moment, sends the melody and harmony flying around the circle of singers.

4. HONEY GATHERING SONG. It is in the honey season that the koko come into their own, and in honey songs that they are most important, with their vital, exciting bell-like clarity. The song begins without fuss, distinguished by the "buzzed" chorus of men, in imitation of the bees they so ardently seek at this time of year. The strong solo is characteristic. The song is finally broken up by the approaching storm.

5. HARP SONG (LESE) Like all village farmers in this area. the focus of Lese in their music is on the instrument. In this case it is a five stringed harp. the sound box carved from an especially resonant wood, the strings made of vine stretched from the skin covering of the resonator to the sharply curved arm of the harp, where it is tight-ened by wooden pegs.

6. SONG OF MEN AND WOMEN Here the Lese show just how close they are to the pygmies, with whom in fact there has been considerable inter-marriage...all one-way traffic, however, pygmy women joining a village, as their children by the Bese husbands do. Lese wives are never taken by pygmies, so the forest bands remain unusually "pure".

7. MARRIAGE CELEBRATION SONG. A festival known as peipa is held throughout this region to commemorate the coming-of-age of a girl. In this song the instrument uses a gourd resonator from the lop of which a stick passes, over which are stretched two vine strings...a popular instrument among the Bera, used for personal pleasure.

8. SONG ACCOMPANIED BY NZENZE(stick-zither). The Bera, like the Nyari, originally occupied the more open grasslands on the far side of the lakes that form their eastern border. Half the Bera split off and drove into the forest, beyond the Lese. There, known as Bira, they live much like the Lese, rather unhappily, in a world full of fear or witchcraft and sorcery, and strange pygmy powers.

9. DANCE SONG OF THE WOMEN. Much given to dancing, the Bera combine it with song, somehow finding enough breath for both activities at the same time. If a song is sung without dancing, it is to be listened to by others as is this one, although the Bera themselves are not above making rude remarks if a performance given in this way does not come up to standard.

10. SKIPPING SONG OF THE WOMEN. Even matronly women are quite apt to take a skipping rope from the young girls, allegedly "to show them how," but really just to have a good skip themselves.

11. FUNERAL SONG. Known as sakana, this is a song that even the school children will learn and respect: this is a song of the ancestral spirits, to plead for their consideration in times of crisis, particularly death. Tradition dies hard. and is often revived in the face of disaster.

12. MEN'S SONG OF PRAISE TO THE CHIEF. Life has its serious moments, and the older men in particular are unhappy with the changes that are coming to their people. Here they switch from the light-hearted songs of the younger people, taking over an old praise-song to the Chief, Ndukukwa, to whom, their listeners are reminded, all Sera owe allegiance. Ndukukwa is the oldest living and most direct descendent of the founding ancestor, from whom all Sera believe themselves descended.

13. SONG WITH HARP ACCOMPANIMENT (Nyari). The Nyari are less harrassed by the forest than the Lose, less argu-mentative, and considerably less concerned with life's problems. They have less contact with the pygmies, but are impressed by pygmy music, and this harp-song shows some influence at work. It takes place at lunch time. by when any sensible Nyari consider the day is done. One play the harp and sings, another vigorously claps a 3 foot version of the koko sticks: men, women and children chatter and gossip.

14. SONG WITH SANZA ACCOMPANIMENT. The sanza is unique to Africa, and the only English equivalent is "hand piano", which it certainty is hot—It consists of a series of tongues, made of bamboo or metal side by side in varying length, bound to a resonation board, which may be fixed into a calabash for additional resonance, or fixed directly to a hollowed-out sound box. The tongues are plucked by a downward movement of the thumbs, as the rest of the fingers of each hand hold the instrument. Little metal bands are frequently atlached loosely to the tongues, or to the board, to give a rattling sound. Here an old man plays a jaunty accompaniment as he sings, surrounded by his family and friends, some of whom whistle along with him, while others talk. This is how the Nyari think life should be.

COLIN M. TURNBULL

Colin M. Turnbull (1924-94) was born in London, and educated at Westminster School and at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he studied anthropology, specializing in the African field. Mr. Turnbull was a research associate at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, to whom this recording is indebted; also a Fellow of the British Royal Anthropological Institute. and a corresponding Member of Le Musee Royale d'Afrique Centrale. Turnbull's best selling book *The Forest People* (Simon & Snuster, NY) describes his experiences while living with among the Mbuti during the time in which these recordings were made. His other works include *The Lonely African*, and *The Human Cycle*.

CREDITS

Digital Mastering, Digital SoundWorks, New York City Cover design, Duy Ngo
Photograph by Colin M. Turnbull Original Lyrichord release: 1961
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