

Tonga Tonkunst: One man One Note

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by Keith Goddard

The music of the Valley Tonga is as extraordinary and distinct as it is beautiful. To date, however, it remains almost totally unexplored by researchers and academics (except in regard to musical instruments as artifacts of material culture) and it is virtually unknown outside the Tonga area.

My curiosity about Valley Tonga music was first aroused through reading a small article by Hugh Tracey which appeared in the African Music Journal. Tracey visited the Zambezi Valley at the invitation of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institution, Lusaka "to record some of the music of that section of the Valley Tonga tribe which will be forced to leave their riverside homes when the water of the kariba Dam begins to rise next year, 1958." Tracey made 72 recordings in the Gwembe District in Zambia mostly from 5 villages (in particular Chipeco and Sinefwala) about 80 to 100 miles up-stream from what was then the Kariba dam site. The recordings represent a fair, though naturally scanty, overview of the musical culture of the Valley Tonga people. The examples were published on vinyl as part of the Sound of Africa Series and each recorded sample is given a short description in the accompanying catalogue. Tracey also recorded some Tonga riddles, the sound of women's bubblepipes and a couple of stories (Iyaano) which included songs.

It was Tracey's description of the Tonga horns (nyele), as used in the ceremony ngoma bontibe, that particularly caught my attention. His comments on the music led me to believe he was totally bewildered by what he was listening to: in the accompanying notes and impressions to the first recorded example of ngoma bontibe (which he labels Ngoma), he suggests that "each man or boy blows one horn and interpolates his note as he pleases while he dances a jig to and fro among the close knot of horn blowers." He describes the result as "a loud and cheerful noise devoid of any melody with everyone, men and women and children shouting, singing, and whistling as they shuffle to the impulse of the drumming." In the notes to a second recording of Ngoma, he says "the tuning of the horns seems to be entirely haphazard and is controlled by the fortuitous length of the horns employed."

This is very wild kind of dance, with everyone dancing madly in a mob. The step is a short staccato, jiggling step to and fro, very simply. Noise seems to be the main object and the dust thrown up by their feet in the alluvial soil of the river valley almost obscured the tight knot of dancers. The celeste caused by the treble pipes is deafening to an observer, but too high-pitched to record."

Given his background and the short time he spent in the Valley, Tracey's reactions are not surprising. His soundworld was the Victorian and Edwardian English classical folksong tradition of Vaughan Williams, Cecil Sharpe and Gustav Holst and the English choral tradition. If he had spent longer than a mere ten days in the area, doubtless he would have revised many of his initial impressions. Nevertheless, despite his general comments, Tracey's instincts must have suggested to him that there was more to the "cheerful noise" than he was hearing. His "experimental recording of the Nyele horns" is intended "to demonstrate their tuning, the order of their appearance and general scheme of melody" But Tonga music does not give up its secrets that easily and Tonga musicians generally offer information only to questions you ask; to them, of course, the structure of their music is simple, perfectly ordered and audibly reasonable.

It is one of those coincidences of history that Tracey should have been trying to come to grips with the Tonga sound world in the Valley oblivious to the fact that similar strange new sound worlds of the post-war European and American avant-garde were breaking news to the North in Europe and the United States: 1957 was the year Stockhausen finished Gruppen, Boulez completed his third piano sonata, and started Pli selon Pli and John Cage wrote his aleatory Concert for Piano and Orchestra. Tracey was in Gwembe a few months after Georgy Ligeti's dramatic flight to Vienna to escape the Russian bombing of Budapest which marked the start of his outstanding compositional career that was eventually to steer him and his son, Lukas, in the direction of Africa. Even as Tracey was recording in Gwembe, the possessors of an ancient futuristic soundworld that would not have looked out of place next to the repertoires of many of these extreme and uncompromising modernists, were being prepared to be herded into lorries and moved to new homes on higher ground. Those on the Zimbabwean side had already been removed

Although the recordings represent no more than a few hurried sonic jottings, Tracey nevertheless left for the Valley Tonga a wonderful musical legacy that otherwise could never have been available to them and he gave modern researchers a number of valuable glimpses into Tonga musical history. His wife, Peggy, who accompanied him on the ten-day excursion, wrote up her own impressions in a small book, *The Lost Valley*, which, for all its subjective and anecdotal qualities, does flesh out the circumstances surrounding her husband's recordings.

On my first journey to the Tonga, I met no musicians but a waiter in Binga suggested I make a trip to Siabuwa, which he described as being representative of the original forms of Valley Tonga culture. Not having much money, I persuaded a young German film maker to organise a shoot in the area and to take me along with him. We went to Siabuwa, met the Chief, and promised to come back in a week's time with beer. On the day of the shoot, in October 1988, instead of taking the tarred road via Bulawayo, we used the route down from Karoi, mistakenly thinking it to be a short cut: it turned out to be little more than a dusty dirt track in parts and a tooth-rattling washboard in others. Some cylinder in one of back

wheels shattered and the shards made deafening scraping noises for the rest of the journey. We got to Siabuwa in the late afternoon. There was a group of men and women sitting under a tree waiting for us. We arrived with no beer, expecting to be able to buy some in the area but there were only a few bottles left in the store and no opaque beer (chibuku) and there was no one around from whom we could purchase any home brew.

Nobody was willing to play until the beer was found. The sun was unbearably hot but the coolness of the evening brought only worries about failing light. The burning of the sun was so extreme that it warped the back windscreens of the car and later, after darkness had fallen, it shattered, cracking the air like a gun shot. After some time, matters were roughly resolved and people agreed to play. One man produced a bag which was filled with horns and he distributed them amongst the men in the group, one horn per man.

The drums began and as the horns started up in response, my ears were flooded by the most extraordinary texture of sound. I was in the middle of rural Zimbabwe where even lion and castle lagers and cocacola had failed to penetrate to any great extent and I was hearing music that made Stockhausen sound like lullabies. I couldn't decide whether it was most like the micro-polyphony of Ligeti, the serial universe of Stockhausen or the aleatorism of Cage. There were about fifteen to twenty horns, smaller higher ones and longer deeper ones. Each player blew one horn, contributing a single pitch to the musical texture as and when it was required in the phrase.

I could hear no recurring pattern, sense no periodic rhythm and feel no beat despite the constant jogging on the spot by the horn players and singers. Everything happened in great swirls. I was caught inside a traffic jam of hooters and a whirlpool of women dancing and singing with great force. At times, the horn players would break away and move off into the distance, often dragging me or one of the film crew with them. When this happened, the drums would settle down to a modest tapping, keeping the basic pattern going. When the horns returned, their approach was welcomed by an upsurge in energy and the "cheerful noise" would start up once more.

Although I was baffled by what I was hearing, the fifties avant garde was a firm part of my soundworld and through my experience of it I seriously doubted that Tonga nyele was a random noise. Since then, over the past ten years, I have spent frequent though short stays in the area, mostly around Siachilaba, listening to Valley Tonga music and trying to come to grips with it.

A question that has always puzzled me is how the Valley Tonga come to be in possession of their unique horn music - not even the Plateau Tonga play nyele. There are many players of "one-man-one-note" musics, some using horns, but the Valley Tonga are seemingly the only people in the world to play small and medium-sized end-blown antelope horns of between roughly twelve and seventeen different pitches in ensembles of forty or more players. The answer lies, perhaps, in the fact that isolation encourages originality. The Tonga, even before Kariba, were settled in a hostile environment plagued by drought and so made minimal contact with outsiders. Nevertheless, only the horns and the accompanying goblet drums are unique to the Valley Tonga; their other instruments they share with their present and former neighbours.

The fundamental principle about Valley Tonga music is that it is neither a static tradition nor entirely uniform. Whilst there is a pervading Valley Tonga spirit to the music, there are numerous, though often small, regional variations. In Northern Zimbabwe, for example, where the influence from the Shona world of the Korekore is strongest, the ceremonies differ quite markedly from the more isolated areas further up stream: Nghozi is known in Mola, Mpande in Siachilaba but the two groups are only dimly aware of the existence of the other's ceremony. The term ngoma bontibe is known both in Zambia and Zimbabwe to describe the ceremony which employs the nyele and the goblet drums; in Zambia, though, the word budima exists to describe the bontibe drums and it often doubles, too, as a generic term for the music.

The texts for nyele songs are social criticisms or warnings to a particular individual or group of people: the first composition from Peter Mwembe in the area of Siachilaba warned farmers not to use for food the seed given to them by government as part of the drought relief programme. Instead they should plant it. "If you misuse the seed, the government will come and arrest you," says the song.

Nyele songs can also be used to humiliate. Any shameful behaviour such as murder or adultery will often find itself expressed into a composition and the intention is to embarrass the offender and his/her close relatives by declaring the crime publically. News travels fast amongst the Valley Tonga, despite the paucity of modern communications, and reports of an individual's behaviour can find itself broadcast over an extensive area within a matter of hours. The effect can be devastating to the accused and his/her family. In addition, these songs remain in the repertoire for some time, thereby compounding the humiliation.

Michael Berkley (1994) describes the souring of a friendship between two individuals in the area of Siachilaba which was represented in two songs. Jails Munkuli wrote a nyele song in 1992 because he felt he was being threatened with murder by Dobbo. Informing the community of his fears in a song seemed his best policy of defense. In response, Dobbo wrote his own song about Jails being in possession of a weapon. Dobbo's song includes a dramatisation of a brawl between Dobbo and Jails. Berkley suggests that the song functioned to diffuse the tense situation since the two are now good friends again.

The Tonga have a tradition of composers (muimbi or musibi). The most distinguished composer at Siachilaba, sixty kilometres from Binga centre, is Siakwede Bokotela Mudenda who often brews beer to entice horn players to his home so he can teach them a new song. Both the words and the music come to Siakwede in dreams and are communicated to him by the ancestors, in this case, masabe, wandering spirits who possess individuals and provide them with particular talents such as song composition, farming or even socially unacceptable behaviour such as thieving. When I talked to John Sialumweya, however, a composer in Siadumbuzia, Lusitu, Zambia, he was categorical that the compositions were the product of his own mind and not passed to him from the spirit world.

Siakwede provides virtually the whole repertoire for Simonga, the group in central Siachilaba. When Siakwede dies, it is said that another man will rise to the fore and take his place as composer for the group.

Ngoma bontibe is performed at the funerals of everyone except babies who die before they cut their first tooth, a sign that marks their entry into the human race. The horns can also be used for general entertainment, competitions and for mass celebrations.

The drums for ngoma bontibe are distinct from those used for other musical expressions amongst the Tonga. There are generally between five and seven of them shaped like square goblets with a hollow pipe of wood but with no foot for the base. They are either slung across the shoulder or held between the thighs for playing.

The first four are played with sticks and the three others with the hands. The biggest drum is so large and heavy that it normally requires one or two persons to support it in addition to the player.

The membrane is fixed to the head of the drum with wooden pegs. Tuning (i.e. tightening the skin) is done by hammering these pegs and by warming the skin near a fire. Bees wax is also smeared onto the largest drums to deepen the tone. Cow or antelope hide is used for the smaller drums; the skins of the two biggest drums are generally fashioned from the ears of elephants.

Each of the drums has its own name. Generally the largest drum has two names, one that refers to its type and another which is a nickname given by the maker. In Siadumbozia, the generic name for the largest drum is ngoma mpati (the name also used in Siabuwa in Zimbabwe), but the nickname given by the maker, Sabutu, was Mazabuka. The drum set for ngoma bontibe is distinct from that for other occasions and dances.

At the start of a bontibe, one drummer calls people by beating out a basic pattern on one of the mid-range drums. The horn players also give out a few blasts, the sound of which can carry very far and alert people to the fact that the proceedings are about to begin.

Nyele are never played by themselves, always to the accompaniment of drums. They vary in size from about 5" to 18" long and are fashioned from species antelope, generally impala for the higher pitches (lubondwe in Siadumbuzia Zambia; mondwe in Nsenga, Zimbabwe), and sable (muchwaile), kudu (shambololo) or waterbuck (nanja) for the lower horns.

Never Chatembe, a teacher at Mayhove school in Mola, explained how the horns are turned into musical instruments around his area. The horns are tuned using a "hot knife straight from the fire" to cut the open end to the required length. After that, a hot wire is used to pierce the small end of the horn and push the marrow up out of the mouth of the horn. The hole is vestigial and is always covered when playing. It is there "to control the situation" one player explained to me.

Oil (traditionally mbono but now commercial vegetable oil) is poured into the horn to improve the sound. Bees wax is moulded around the large opening of the horn both to soften the edge to protect the lips and to fine-tune the instrument.

In Zambia, a very different method of horn construction was described to me at Siadumbozia. Salt is put into the hole which dissolves the marrow (cifuwa). A small hole is then cut into the tip of the horn and a wire is inserted into the end so as to push the marrow out. Vegetable oil is used for cleaning the horn.

To play nyele, the performer tucks the wide mouth of the instrument just below the edge of the bottom lip pressing it there by holding the index finger over the hole at the tip of the instrument. The upper lip is brought down slightly in order to concentrate as much of the air flow into the instrument. The player forces his breath into the horn at great speed by tightening the stomach muscles in a spasmodic jerk.

Even the most experienced players become exhausted. For this reason, there are normally at least two examples of each instrument so that one player can continue if the other tires. A single piece generally lasts from around ten to twenty minutes.

Young boys join in by playing instruments fashioned from reeds (matete) which are tuned to one of the higher pitches of the nyele ensemble. The idea is that they can join in and produce a sound despite the fact that they do not yet have the lung capacity to play a real horn. Men with greater lung capacity tend to play the deeper horns which require a great deal

more breath to make them sound. The general understanding is that players choose the horn which suits their voice best.

Tracey noted how players would block one ear with a free hand. "The hornblowers at first held their free hand to an ear, presumably to help them establish their own contribution to the mass of sound." I met only one player in Mweemba who put his finger in his ear and his explanation was that it made "the music sound very nice."

Accompanying the nyele is always one mwembo, a side-blown one-note trumpet fashioned mostly from wood but sometimes from horn which is played in one hand. I have come across it frequently at ngoma bontibe both in Zambia and Zimbabwe where it is used to produce short punchy rhythmic motives which are freely placed over the sound of the horns or at any other time during the ceremony. Munkuli Sialwindi, the keeper of the horns at Siachilaba Central, explained to me that it was used in the past to encourage bravery in young men.

Although I have met one female nyele player, generally speaking, women do not play the instrument. Partly this is because of the air pressure required to make the instrument sound but also because men simply say that it is men who play nyele and women who play rattles and sing. Hand rattles (insaka) are used by women and girls on all musical occasions including funerals. In the past, they were invariably fashioned from the small dried gourds of wild fruit and filled with hard seeds or stones and fixed onto the end of a short stick. Today, a small condensed-milk tin (or something of a similar size) containing stones will often replace the traditional gourd. Insaka yamwaana is a baby rattle used by mothers to soothe a crying child. Playing the rattle and singing lullabies (Iwimbo Iwabana) are meant to mask the cries of the baby which might otherwise be heard by malevolent spirits who wish to bring harm to young infants. Leg rattles (masangusangu) are threaded onto sticks and attached to the calf of each leg with string or thin rope (traditionally this was bark string).

There is a particular orderly way in which budima fits into a funeral for a mature adult. After the first day which is taken up with the physical burial of the deceased, the nyele group from the immediate area will arrive on the second day to play music. On the third day, nyele groups from outside may enter the funeral and compete with the resident group. The funeral and the music can then last for upto a further two days or more.

Of particular interest to the observer is the way in which a nyele group uses its performance space. The music generally starts under the shade of a large tree (usually a baobab). The players begin by forming themselves into three or four small circles each with about five or six players each; the women form a larger circle around the outside. The dance for both men and women is a jogging-on-the-spot which helps all the participants to keep to one central pulse.

Then, without apparent warning, some or all of the nyele players and most of the women move off from the starting position, travelling upto twenty meters or more from their original position. The largest drum will often be carried on these musical treks, supported by two or three helpers. At this point, the drumming under the tree settles down to a gentle tick where the top drum keeps the basic beat going.

After some minutes, the musical travellers return and there is much cheering and ululating from the women. The drums start up again with renewed vigour and the horns that had remained behind, join in once more.

The description of a nyele musical structure I came across in Mola revealed an interesting compositional process. Translating from the leader of the group (who may also have been the composer), Chatembe explained how one composition was constructed in phases (chigamu). The signal for the start of chigamu chakutangu (phase one) is given by the drum gogogo, after which nsekunseku enters followed by the horns chiduntu and mpindakati. At a certain point, the musicians move off leaving gogogo to keep the pulse ticking over. For phase two (chigamu chachiviri), the upper horns are silent and the lower horns (saina to chigonte) enter.

I have never been given what I considered a totally satisfactory explanation for the moving off from the central spot and return. Chatembe simply described it as "the procedure" though he also suggested it added interest to the proceedings and gave time for late comers to pick up their nyele and join in. In Siachilaba, the major reason given was that it gave the drummers a chance to rest and it allowed certain groups of horn players to fit themselves together. Whatever, the reason, those who move off are greeted with great enthusiasm on their return as the drums pick up the rhythm and energy once more.

At a five-year-old child's funeral in Siadumbozia, Zambia, the nyele players and drummers moved through the village as one group pausing at certain spots but always continuing with their playing. At one point, the players moved to the grave of the child at the edge of the kraal and danced upon and around the mound. They then returned to the central core of the village. The explanation given here, which was something which I had already felt instinctively, was that the musicians were bringing music to all those areas which had been visited by the child whilst it was alive.

There seems to be some strong connection between fighting and the bontibe. At every performance I have attended, both men and women regularly break off to enact certain stylised attacking movements using shields, knobkerries and spears. The effect, which is often very beautiful, is reminiscent of certain style of slow martial arts such as Tai Chi. The

practice is called kuzemba which literally means to show that you can defeat someone.

This spirit of challenge is inherent in muzandano/muzundano where nyele are used for competition purposes. Here two or three groups from neighbouring areas meet to challenge each other. The aim is to attract the attention of the women through singing, playing, dancing and fanciful costumes. Those that draw in the women are the winners; those that fail to continue lose "the game".

Although not strictly connected to the funeral, the small kankobela (also called kanamala in parts) is able to reproduce the music of the nyele.

The kankobela has a small wooden fan-shaped soundboard through the centre of which is drilled a round hole. Between eight and twelve metal tongues (lamellae) are fixed over the soundboard and held in place by a bar over a bridge. Often there is only one manual consisting of eight notes which follow the symmetrical design found on many other mbiras whereby the lowest notes are in the centre of the instrument and the highest are at the outer reaches. If there is an upper manual, it generally has between one and three keys which are repetitions or higher octave transpositions of notes found on the lower manual. A paper-spider web (namundelele) is fixed to the back of the instrument using the milky sap of the mbala plant and when the instrument is played, the web produces a gentle buzz.

To amplify the sound, the instrument is placed over a small gourd or tin with the back of the soundboard resting on the two index fingers in order to allow sound to escape from the resonator.

Kankobela is not used for any ritual purpose. It is common to find a player joining a group of drinking men in the heat of the afternoon under a tree and entertaining them with humorous songs, laments and story songs relating to current events or personal experiences.

A very old blind player of nearly ninety, John Cibila, from Ntambali Village in Lusitu played me a twelve-key instrument. A fine musician, he had been the composer of nyele songs in his younger days and could still play some of his nyele compositions on kankobela. He is a great entertainer and insisted that the crowd of teenagers that gathered around him join in with the responses which he first taught them.

With the idea that he might consider the pitches of his mbira might in some way be connected to the nyele, I asked him if he could give me the names of the keys on his instrument. He proceeded, shakily at first, to identify each key on the instrument by the name of a nyele horn. The only exceptions were the two outer keys on the left and the outer key on the right, high notes which he called mbilivili and for which there was no nyele equivalent.

The Tonga lost their land with the coming of Kariba but they have managed to retain much of their rich cultural heritage. The major threat has been the coming of some missions which preach that ngoma bontibe is of the devil. If these missionaries are to get their way and the Valley tonga are to stop performing their music, the Valley Tonga will finally have had everything stripped from them - even their unique cultural identity.

ENDS

(written in 1997)