

Pluriarcs in the Sub-Saharan Africa Collection of the Weltmuseum Wien

Pluriarcs consist of several smaller musical bows which are affixed to a resonator body. Following Sachs's classification, this type of instrument is called *Bogenlaute* and *bow-lute* in German and English academic writing respectively (Sachs 1929: 157, 1940:94). French the term *pluriarc*, coined by Montandon, has become widely used (Montandon 1934: 35). In the inventory of sub-Saharan African collection of the Vienna Museum of Ethnology, the pluriarcs recorded with names given by their collectors or the responsible curators and appear as *Bogenharfe*, *Bogenlaute*, *Harfe*, *Guitarre*, *Zither* or simply *Saiteninstrument* (stringed instrument).¹ Although the playing technique of some pluriarc types is similar to that of the lute, which may explain the name *bow-lute*, the strings of this musical instrument do not run parallel to each other above a straight neck, as in the case of lutes, but share the morphological features of musical bows. Consequently, it is more appropriate to use the Latin-based French term *pluriarc* (meaning several bows).

According to Schaeffner's hypothesis, pluriarcs presumably have their origins in Ancient Egypt and may have developed from musical bows affixed to the resonator body of sub-Saharan African bow harps (Schaeffner 1936: 185). However, pluriarcs are first mentioned only in the 16th century and thus the possibility that this type of musical instrument developed over a prolonged time in that era cannot be ruled out. It is certain that the brass relief plaques from the Benin Kingdom (Nigeria) dating back to the period between 1500 and 1650 already display a representation of the pluriarc (Martin-O'Meara 1995: 259). Although Praetorius calls it an American Indian instrument, a representation of the characteristically sub-Saharan African pluriarc is also clearly recognizable on figure 1 of *Syntagma musicum* Vol. II. (Praetorius 1618: Table XXXI.). Thus we can conclude that pluriarcs have undoubtedly existed since the end of the 16th century or the beginning of the 17th century.

According to the creation myth of the **Likuba** people, living in the Mai-Ndombe lake district in the western part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the pluriarc is a gift from heaven and an incarnation of the first man, Eba Niambe (Leboeuf 1964: 422).

Originally, the instrument had three strings symbolizing a house, a boat and the mother's body. Eba Niambe's second son was the culture hero Esszé, who due to some form of

¹ Inv. Nos.: 122.947.; 166.458.; 118.655.; 123.135.; 133.592.; 91.297.;

paralysis spent his life in a village playing his pluriarc, again a gift from heaven. He also possessed the power of divination, thus he can be considered the first musician, diviner and magician (Leboeuf 1964: 425). For the **Vili** people in southwest DRC and the **Yombe** people in northwest DRC, the pluriarc named *nsambi* plays an essential role in the performance of the “liboka” divination dance, since their magicians are able to communicate with the spirits with the help of this musical instrument (Hagenbücher-Sacripanti 1973: 34). For the neighbouring **Teke** people, the pluriarc named *ngwomi* functions as a mourning instrument used as musical accompaniment during the funeral ceremony of the publicly displayed deceased ruler, once again relating to the theme of communicating with the spirits of the other world (Rouget 1947: 25). In southern Gabon, pluriarcs serve to accompany healing rituals in case of illnesses caused by the spirits of fertility and twin births (Sallée 1978: 36).

Among the **Kongo** people of northern Angola, pluriarcs are used by the secret society of the “ndembo” cult to trigger visions about the future (Södeberg 1956: 170).

According to comparative ethnomusicological and historical research, pluriarcs appeared among the **Kele** ethnic group of Gabon and most likely evolved somewhere in the frontier territory of today’s Gabon and Republic of Congo (Kubik 1989: 17). The presence of pluriarcs in the Central African Kingdom of Kongo can already be documented in the 17th century (Merolla 1692: 171). However, it cannot be excluded that a musical instrument whose morphological features are different from those of Central and Western African pluriarcs has developed independently from musical bows among the **San** people in Southwest Africa (Kirby 1968: 244).

Pluriarcs are typically widespread in West Africa. The sub-Saharan Africa collection of the Vienna Museum of Ethnology contains pluriarcs from Guinea, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola and Namibia.² The only anomaly is from Tanzania and dates back to 1984, which shows that the musical instrument has also begun to spread eastwards from Central Africa (Fig.1).³ The rest of the pluriarc types in the collection date back to the period between 1888 and 1929 (except one, which is from 1950) and come from the coastal areas of western Africa or from regions relatively close to them. We can distinguish among several pluriarc types according to the number of bows and the way they are affixed, the resonator body and the playing technique. In the case of western and central African types of pluriarcs, the individual bows are typically joined with one or more rakers

² Inv. Nos.: 118.725.; 122.947.; 29.929.; 23.801.; 101.754.;

³ Inv.No.: 166.458.;

(Fig.2.).⁴ Cameroonian types show a different solution. The resonator body has an inverted pitched-roof shape, the bows are fixed in a knot at its bottom and spread out like a fan at its other end, or the bows are of different length and arranged closely to each other (Fig.3.).⁵ In the case of South African pluriarcs, however, bows are fixed in holes drilled into the resonator body.⁶ The resonator body itself can be open or closed at its bottom, as well as of boxlike, cylindrical, hemispherical or anthropomorphic shape. The latter can be related to the ancestor cult. The most widespread form has a trough-shaped hollow resonator body which is covered with a thin or thick sheet.⁷ As pluriarcs became widespread, local versions using local materials appeared. For example, the six-string version used by the *griots* in Mali has a resonator body made of a hemispherical calabash gourd – a material typical of West African musical instruments – which is turned upside down and opens at its bottom (Sebes 1973: 8). We can find similar pluriarcs with a calabash gourd resonator body among the West African **Fulani** people, whose nomadic, migratory lifestyle could have largely contributed to spreading this instrument in West Africa (Fig.4.).⁸ In southwestern Cameroun a five string version used by the **Banyang** people has become widespread. This version is called *don* and has a boxlike resonator body which is curved at its bottom and covered with a flat wooden sheet at the top. The neighboring Pygmies also use this type of pluriarc, which is accompanied with a long drum.

These smaller pluriarcs are played while walking or squatting. The instrument is held in front of the stomach and the strings are plucked similarly to the playing technique of the harp. A different technique can be observed among the **Kuba** people living in the central parts of the Democratic Republic of Kongo. Here, the four- or eight-string *lakweemy* pluriarc is bent to the right and the strings are plucked with the right-hand fingers, while the left palm is placed at the end of the resonator body with the tip of the left-hand fingers pressing down the vibrating strings. The same technique is used in the “*zebola*” musical group of the neighboring **Mongo** people. This musical group accompanies the similarly named “*zebola*” dance with three different types of musical bows (*the boyeke and lokombi type*), two skrapers (*iteke*) and a calabash Megaphone (*menda*) (Vangroenweghe 1986: 82).

Pluriarcs are called *nsambi* by the **Zande** and **Yombe** people in northern and western parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The **Bwete** people in North Gabon also use the

⁴ Inv.Nos.: 28.929.; 118.655.; 122.947.; 123.135.;

⁵ Inv.No.: 91.297.;

⁶ Inv. Nos: 189.223.; 101.754.;

⁷ Inv.No.: 123.135.;

⁸ Inv.No.: 118.655.;

name *nsambi*, while the **Teke** people in the East have pluriarcs that are similar to the older *nsambi* type, but are bigger in size and called *ngwomi*. This latter name is a variant of *ngombi*, a term designating the bow harp widely used in West and Central Gabon. It is noted that most names used for pluriarcs derive from the root “*kombe*” or “*gombe*” (*longombe*, *lokombi*). (Sallée-Ganseman 1986: 120).

Besides their spiritual functions, pluriarcs, like other musical instruments, also served as symbols of power, indicating the size of the territory controlled by a chieftain. Consequently, besides pluriarcs with an average length of 50-70 cm, we can also find bigger versions that are 150-170 cm long (Fig.5.).⁹ In eastern Gabon, the *ngwomi* pluriarc was a symbol of power among the **Teke** people as well as an instrument played during feasts, thus the power of the chieftain and the size of the territory under his control correlated with the length of the pluriarcs. (Sallée 1975: 32). In the past, the strings of the *ngwomi* pluriarcs were made of elephant hair or plant fibres. Nowadays raffia or wire is used. The *ngwomi* pluriarcs are held squarely in front of the body and their playing technique is similar to that of the harp: all strings are plucked with a plectrum which is made of a flexible plant and held in the right hand, and players press down those strings whose vibration they want to stop with their left-hand fingers. The end of the five-string *ngwomi* pluriarc is also equipped with jingling metal plates, which is a characteristic of West African lutes and goblet drums, to amplify the sound effect.

The large pluriarc is also widespread among the **Konda** people in the central parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo. This pluriarc is called *ntembe lokombi* (Laurenty 1960: 176). Due to its large size it has to be played with a different technique: players hold the instrument in front of their body with the help of a cord slung over their left shoulders and pluck the strings with an oval, ring-shaped plectrum, while pressing down the vibrating strings with the left-hand fingers to emit sounds. The resonator body of the 150-160 cm long *ntembe lokombi* is made of a trough-shaped log, which is covered with a thick wooden sheet.

Besides their spiritual and power functions, the most widespread function of pluriarcs, similarly to lamellophones, is their musical function. They are used to accompany walking, which is a typically sub-Saharan African feature (Brauer-Benke 2007: 6). The term *logombe*, which is widespread among the **Sakata** people of the Congo Basin, designates a smaller pluriarc with a cylindrical resonator body used to accompany long trade journeys made on foot. The eight-string *csihumba*, which is used by the **Humbe** and **Handa** peoples of

⁹ Inv.No.: 133.592.;

southwestern Angola, can be morphologically related to this type of instrument (Kubik 1965: 98). This instrument is made portable with the help of a cord slung around the neck. The songs played on this type of instrument also refer to the long journeys made on foot which started from the interior of the continent leading to the port of Benguela, an important center for the slave trade to Brazil. Due to this transatlantic trade pluriarcs appeared in Brazil already in the 18th century.

Bushman peoples use pluriarcs to accompany walking or their magical songs. In southern Angola the **Kung** people use a four- or five-string pluriarc called *gwashi* (Marshall 1976: 372). The four- or five-string pluriarcs have a trough-like resonator body ornamented with a carving of a porcupine, a popular target of **Kung** hunters. This type of instrument can also be found among the **Damara** people, and it is called =*gou kha:s*. The =*gou* stands for wooden resonator and *kha:s* for bow (Kirby 1968: 244). The =*gou kha:s* pluriarc has five strings, thus five different sounds can be played on it. The player accompanies the instrumental music with grumbling sounds, but without uttering words.

In northern Namibia pluriarcs are typical among the **Ovambo** people and were first described in the 1870s (Andersson 1875: 233). Here the small musical bows are pegged to the side of the resonator body. The resonator body itself is made of wood, which is hollowed out like a trough; its upper third is covered with a wooden sheet, at the end of which there are notches for the strings. The pluriarcs of the **Ovambo** usually have seven strings. The strings are made of twisted cow gut and plucked with fingers. In northern Namibia the *ohindzсарindzsa* is a five-string pluriarc exclusively played by women among the **Himba** people (Fig.6.).¹⁰ This five-string pluriarc, which has a rectangular box-like resonator body, is also widespread among the neighboring Bushman people as an instrument played by women. Here it is called *oaqce* (Brenner 1997: 559).

To sum up, the sub-Saharan Africa collection of the Vienna Museum of Ethnology with its twelve pluriarcs represents the regional and morphological differences of this instrument type well.¹¹ The functional analysis of the instrument shows typical characteristics of sub-Saharan Africa, where human force was used predominantly for carrying weight and for travelling. In Africa, this could have contributed to the development of autochthone instruments originally used to enforce the rhythm of walking, such as lamellophones, which belong to the class of idiophones and pluriarcs, which belong to the class of chordophones. Later, these instruments became more sophisticated and thus suitable for more serious musical

¹⁰ Inv.No.: 189.223.;

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performance or specialized to serve the needs of local traditions for sacred music. Similarly to what is observed in the case of other African instruments, pluriarcs are exclusively played by women among South African groups, a tendency which can be explained by the sacred traditions of traditional African societies.

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