Circulation of music, circulation of people.

Musical practices and relationships between Babongo Pygmies, women and neighbours

(Chaillu Mountains of central and southern Gabon)

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Chaillu Mountains of central and southern Gabon
Main locations of Babongo villages and main interethnic background
The Babongo and their neighbours:

“are best analyzed as two different ethnic groups within a single society, rather than as two separate societies” (Grinker 1990: 112).

Grinker, Roy Richard
Denominations used

1) Ethnonyms: Babongo, Mitsogo, Masangu

2) Relational generic terms:

- “Pygmy”: representation of the Babongo according to their neighbours.

- “Neighbours”: representation of the Mitsogo and the Masangu from the Babongo’s point of view.

From the Mitsogo and Masangu’s point of view, the Babongo are not neighbours like the others.
Music circulation

Two types:
1) Progressive diffusion from village to village
2) Passage of some musical pieces from one ritual repertoire to another

I will focus on the second type.
Presentation plan

• Elements of the music structure likely to encourage the circulation of pieces
  – Particular link with Pygmies and women.
Presentation plan

• Elements of the music structure likely to encourage the circulation of pieces
  – Particular link with Pygmies and women.

• Representations explicitly linking Pygmies and women to musical circulation.
Presentation plan

- Elements of the music structure likely to encourage the circulation of pieces
  - Particular link with Pygmies and women.

- Representations explicitly linking Pygmies and women to musical circulation.

- Dynamics of musical circulation making visible a certain ambivalence of relations between dominant and subordinate social groups.
Ritual system
and
Musical structure
Rituals which partake in the musical circulation in the region

- *bwiti disumba*, a collective male initiation rite
- *bwiti misoko*, a therapeutic branch of *bwiti*
- *nyembe*, a generic term for the collective female initiation rite.
Rituals which partake in the musical circulation in the region

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• *nyembe*, a generic term for the collective female initiation rite.

→ Circulation of the musical pieces of the danced public phases
Repertoire of the danced public phases, a graphic representation

Bwiti Disumba

Bwiti Misoko

Nyembe

Repertoire of the danced public phases
Structure of musical pieces

• A musical phrase is constituted by one part sung by a choir, answering to a soloist who starts the singing.

• As music is cyclic, this musical phrase is repeated all along the piece.
The Babongo and the women are said by the male neighbours to liven up the danced public phases which are at the heart of the dynamics of music circulation.
Music circulation
and its limits:
To take, to take too much, to forbid taking
Discourses about music circulation

• “We took that from such village/ such person, here even right now!”
Discourses about music circulation

• “We took that from such village/ such person, here even right now!”

• “Those Pygmies here do nothing else but take! Take! They aren’t serious. They do not respect tradition.”
Discourses about music circulation

• “We took that from such village/ such person, here even right now!”

• “Those Pygmies here do nothing else but take! Take! They aren’t serious. They do not respect tradition.”

• “That song, it’s for bwiti. But women have changed the lyrics and have taken it to put in their nyembe.”
Discourses about music circulation

• “We took that from such village/ such person, here even right now!”

• “Those Pygmies here do nothing else but take! Take! They aren’t serious. They do not respect tradition.”

• “That song, it’s for bwiti. But women have changed the lyrics and have taken it to put in their nyembe.”

• “It’s those Pygmies’ wives, they take men’s songs too much!”
Babongo’s rituals and repertoires

*Mudimu* and *Boluma*:
- Follow the first successful hunt of a wild pig with a spear
- Consecrate a man as a hunter.
Babongo’s rituals and repertoires

*Mudimu* and *Boluma*:
- Follow the first successful hunt of a wild pig with a spear
- Consecrate a man as a hunter.

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The Babongo circulate their neighbours’ music and not their own.
Whereas the subalterns’ repertoires are not much “taken” by the dominant groups, the subalterns themselves are renowned for being most active in the circulation of the musical pieces coming from the neighbouring and male repertoires.
Thank you for your attention!
Circulation of music, circulation of people.
Musical practices and relationships
between Babongo Pygmies, women and neighbours

My ethnographic fieldwork was based in the Chaillu Mountains of central and southern Gabon. I worked with the Babongo Pygmies and their non-pygmy neighbours, the Mitsogo and the Masangu. As you can see on the map, the Babongo live by the roadside, next to the Mitsogo and the Masangu. They also live along dirt tracks in the forest, thus connecting the north and the south of the area. Despite the apparent socio-cultural homogeneity of these different groups, ethnic distinction is maintained. It appears in a series of discrepancies that set the Babongo apart from their neighbours. Thus, the Babongo and their neighbours are not fused in a unique and undifferentiated society. But they are not different enough to be perceived as distinct societies either. Following the example of the Efe and the Lese of Ituri described by Roy Richard Grinker¹, the Babongo and their neighbours “are best analyzed as two different ethnic groups within a single society, rather than as two separate societies” (1990: 112).

In fact, the Babongo are still associated by their neighbours with negative physical and behavioural stereotypes commonly attributed to Central African Pygmies. Despite common socio-cultural structures, it is thus on the basis of an ethnic criterion that the Babongo, as Pygmies, are considered by their neighbours as an inferior social class. And as such, they are economically and politically subordinated. This first opposition founded on an ethnic criterion enables me to summarize here the denominations used in this paper. To the ethnonyms - Babongo, Mitsogo, Masangu – I add some relational generic terms – Pygmies, neighbours – which insist on the different perspectives of the ones on the others. I thus chose to keep the word “Pygmies” as a discriminating category which has been locally re-appropriated. As for the word “neighbours”, it refers to the non-pygmy groups with whom the Babongo maintain regular contact. Furthermore, the very exclusion of the Babongo Pygmies from this

“neighbours” category also highlights the Mitsogo and Masangu’s point of view, according to which the Babongo are not neighbours like the others.

As with the Babongo in relation to their non-pygmy neighbours, women constitute a second economically and politically subordinated social group in relation to men. My aim here is to show that the analysis of musical circulation at the regional level enables us to draw a parallel between the status of Pygmies in relation to their neighbours and that of females in relation to male initiates. Grinker has used the metaphor of gender to describe how relationships of inequality between social groups take place in relation to the village as the central point. According to his analysis, Lese men, as village insiders, make up the dominant group. Efe and Lese men’s wives, as village outsiders, make up a subordinated group assimilated to females. In the context of music circulation, it is more specifically in regards to the relationship to initiation that I would like to frame the different categories of persons (neighbours, Pygmies, men, women). Initiation indeed gives rise to most of the rituals and much of the musical production. The gendered categories of “men” and “women” that I use qualify “the male initiates” vs “the women initiates”. From a relational perspective, these categories also point to the non-initiated status of women in relation to male initiates, and vice versa.

Music circulation consists in the integration by a group of individuals of a musical piece in one of their ritual repertoires. While attending a ritual in a neighbouring village, or when hosting participants from other villages, an individual or a group of people may like a new musical piece so much as to learn it in order to perform it themselves at the next ritual opportunity. Music circulation thus implies a progressive diffusion from village to village. It also appears in the passage of some musical pieces from one ritual repertoire to another. The parallel that I want to draw between the status of Pygmies and that of women mostly takes into account the musical circulation from one ritual repertoire to another. I will begin by analysing the elements of the music structure which are likely to encourage the circulation of pieces. I will then discuss the representations, which are perceptible in discourse, that explicitly link Pygmies and women to musical circulation. Finally, I will show that the dynamics of musical circulation at the regional level make visible a certain ambivalence in relations between dominant and subordinate social classes.
Ritual system and musical structure

The Babongo are initiated to all the rituals identified as of non-pygmy origin that are performed by their neighbours. Three of these rituals partake in the musical circulation in the region: the *bwiti disumba*, a collective male initiation rite, the *bwiti misoko*, a therapeutic branch of *bwiti*, and the *nyembe*, a generic term for collective female initiation rite. Significantly, these three rituals have in common the alternation of secret phases restricted to initiates, and danced public phases, during which the non-initiates are required to actively participate. Unlike the repertoires of secret phases, the number of musical pieces constitutive of the public dances’ repertoire is unlimited; the same pieces are not systematically performed from one time to the next, and some are gradually forgotten while new ones are integrated. It is the musical pieces of these danced public phases that circulate from one village to the other, but also from one musical repertoire to the other.

Diagram: “Repertoire of the danced public phases, a graphic representation”

In the diagram, each coloured circle represents a ritual, constituted by secret phases and, in the shaded section, public phases. As the overlay of colours in the shaded section shows, all scenarios are possible, from musical pieces shared by the three rituals, to those that are not shared at all, including the musical pieces shared by two out of three repertoires. Thus, the repertoire of the danced public phases of each ritual is not really specific. Neither is it entirely common to the three rituals, which is why we can speak of circulation. Circulation is facilitated by the common structure shared by the musical pieces from every repertoire: the musical phrase is made of a part sung by a choir, answering to a soloist, who starts the singing. As the music is cyclic, this musical phrase is repeated all along the piece. At this stage, a first correlation between music circulation, Pygmies and women can be established: the neighbours attribute both to Babongo and to women particular musical skills; they are said to liven up the danced public phases of *Bwiti* male rituals and are renowned performers, whose participation may even be deemed necessary. And as I said, the danced public phases of rituals are at the heart of the dynamics of music circulation.
Music circulation and its limits: to take, to take too much, to forbid taking

The circulation of musical pieces is not said to result from the actions of giving, giving back or receiving, but rather from the action of “taking”. As one informant told me: “we took that (i.e. a musical piece) from such village/ such person, here even right now (i.e. very recently)” The taking of a musical piece does not incur any debt in exchange. Above all, the discourse on music circulation transpires in cases of denunciations of misuse. Thus, Mitsogo and Masangu male initiates complain about the circulation in the nyembe female ritual of some musical pieces from bwiti male ritual: either they consider that these musical pieces “should not circulate” as they say, or that the taking of musical pieces from male repertoires happens too often. The neighbours stigmatize Pygmies, nyembe female initiates, and nyembe Babongo female initiates in the following words:

1) “Those Pygmies here do nothing else but take! Take! They aren’t serious. They do not respect tradition.”
2) “That song, it’s for bwiti. But women have changed the lyrics and have taken it to put in their nyembe.”
3) “It’s those Pygmies’ wives, they take men’s songs too much!”

In the accusations of excessive circulation of music, it is never the male neighbours who are accused. What the neighbours blame the Pygmies for, Babongo men reproach their women with. The Babongo women (wives and relatives), who cumulate the two subordinated statuses (Pygmy and female) are thus the most stigmatized group. In response to the recurring, excessive musical appropriations by women, Babongo men sometimes resort to dissuasive measures. They will thus sometimes introduce into the bwiti male ritual a musical piece from a secret phase of a nyembe female ritual. However, this kind of taking, whose lifespan is rather ephemeral, is not approved by the initiated neighbours, who see this as a further breach of tradition by the Babongo.

The expression “taking too much” thus expresses the existence of limits to musical circulation, even though these are not always observed. The accusation of non-respect is always directed from male neighbours to women and to Babongo, that is, from the socially dominant group to the subordinated social classes. The Babongo however, despite being both Pygmies and subordinated, impose on their neighbours (men and women) another strict limit to music circulation. Indeed, some rituals are specifically associated with the Babongo. Either they derive from the Babongo or they originate from other groups. In both cases, however, Babongo are nowadays their sole custodians. Most of them are rites of passage associated
with hunting techniques and with different species of game. This is the case of Mudimu and Boluma, rituals which follow the first successful hunt of a wild pig with a spear and consecrate a man as a hunter. The Babongo deny access to their own rituals and forbid the circulation of their own musical repertoires to their neighbours. Thus, recognized for their active participation in the circulation of music, it is their neighbours’ music that the Babongo circulate and not their own.

To conclude, the Babongo’s repertoires are above all receiving repertoires, whereas the neighbours’ repertoires are more diffusing ones. Similarly, women take more from men than the contrary, such that the female nyembe repertoire may also be qualified as a receiving repertoire in contrast to the male, diffusing ones. To sum up, I would say that whereas the subalterns’ repertoires are not much “taken” by the dominant groups, the subalterns themselves are renowned for being most active in the circulation of the musical pieces coming from the neighbouring and male repertoires.