

[Working Paper] The Zande *Akpaningba* as a Source of Identity, Unity, and Joy



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For over thirty years, [Wendy Atkins](#) has been ministering in central Africa with Africa Inland Mission International. Beginning her time there by teaching music to MKs, she quickly realized how important local arts (music, dance, drama, visual art, and oral verbal arts) are as artistic genres of communication in the African context. This discovery has led her to serve local churches, Bible colleges, and seminaries in Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Uganda, and South Sudan through teaching courses and facilitating workshops on the Creating Local Arts Together process, Culture Meets Scripture, and Arts and Trauma Healing.

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Introduction

In 2009, more than 3,000 Congolese refugees fled attacks by the Lord's Resistance Army and crossed a river into Central African Republic (CAR) to safety. Living in the town where they landed, I observed how the *akpaningba* played a role in helping people cope with this traumatic experience. Soon after their arrival, the people in the camp organized weekly *kpaningba*¹ sessions. Every Friday afternoon in an open area near the camp, three men played an *akpaningba*, and another beat on an old truck battery case. Others played *anzoro*² as they danced to the sounds of these instruments. Upon my arrival one afternoon, they began singing *Mbiko Nyemuse na Ash cher, ani kpi ku ti ablanketi!* ("Because of Nyemuse and the UNHCR, we now sleep under blankets.") My efforts to facilitate the distribution of blankets sent from a relief organization inspired the *bayango*³ of this dance group to create a song of gratitude, accompanied by the *akpaningba*. The *akpaningba* was used to "speak" a word of thanks at a spontaneous and appropriate moment. When their very lives were turned upside down, playing, singing, and dancing to the sound of the *akpaningba* brought unity and joy to these refugees in the midst of overwhelming circumstances.

¹ *Akpaningba* is what the Azande call the wooden instrument classified as a xylophone according to the Hornbostel-Sachs classification system. The *kpaningba* is the circle dance genre performed to the sound of the instrument.

² Idiophones made of metal circles bent in half then attached to handles. The metal balls inside cause the *anzoro* to produce a bell-like sound when struck together.

³ The term for a male lead singer.



The Akpaningba



Figure 1. Lengths of *mbuka* wood left to dry



Figure 2. The *akpaningba* crafted for the author

Hand carved from trees readily available in local forests, the akpaningba is a cultural identity marker for the Zande people living in northeast Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), southeast CAR, and southwest Republic of South Sudan (Minada 2011, 136). The traditional akpaningba comprises fourteen to twenty-one bars, or *mbadaha*, tuned to an anhemitonic pentatonic scale pattern (Pioro 2015). Specialists who play the akpaningba make their own instruments by felling a tree,⁴ removing the bark, then splitting and cutting the trunk into lengths of roughly one meter. After these lengths have been left to dry for at least one week, their ends are chopped off, to enable tuning. Cutting chunks off the fronts and backs of the bars allows further tone adjustments. As the wood dries, tuning continues until a stable series of pentatonic scales is achieved when the ends of the *mbadaha* are struck with short wooden sticks. To improve the resonance of the instrument, the *mbadaha* are laid on the ground on top of two banana plant stalks stationed in the form of an elongated, oblique, open V-shape.

The Kpaningba Genre

The akpaningba is the lead instrument in the Zande circle dance genre, the kpaningba, one of “the most popular kinds of entertainment among the Azande” (Kubik 1964, 42). The genre combines complicated dance steps, instrumental music, and call-and-response vocalizations. As three or four people—usually men—play the akpaningba, another person plays a wooden slit drum, *gugu*, and another plays a cylindrical drum, the *gaza*. Everyone is welcome to join the kpaningba circle. Moving in a counterclockwise direction around the instrumentalists, skilled dancers performing intricate steps form the main circle. Learners place themselves in an outer circle, mimicking the more experienced participants of the inner circle. Children animate the center of the circle with spontaneous dance moves. All are invited, no matter what their level of expertise—an example of the Zande cultural values of inclusiveness, communal acceptance, and mutual dependency.

⁴ The local names for the preferred trees are *ngbuka*, *kumbukumbu*, *pewa*, and *kalafulu* (Pioro 2015; Minada 2011, 136).

Engaging with the Akpaningba

To better understand the Azande's relationship with the akpaningba, I decided to learn the instrument myself. Moving to Banda, DRC, in 2014, created that opportunity. I was deeply aware of how, in the early 1900s, missionaries, not understanding the importance of critical contextualization (Harris 2007, 15), instructed local people who joined the church to disown many cultural practices, including the use of traditional instruments. I also knew that present-day church leaders discouraged their congregants from associating with the akpaningba. The instrument's connections with alcohol and sexual promiscuity, often evident at village kpaningba performances, caused church leaders to disregard the value of engaging with the instrument. These associations, together with long-standing tradition, meant that I had to request permission from local church leaders before I began lessons. In my discussions with the leadership, I highlighted the akpaningba's versatility as a locally made instrument, easier on the budget than electronic keyboards and guitars, the currently favored instruments in the church. I wanted to encourage people to consider how the sound of the akpaningba drew the attention of their people in ways that connected deeply with their identity and spirituality. As I learned the instrument, I hoped the church leaders might reflect on the value of the akpaningba to the Azande, challenging them to consider use of this cultural symbol to communicate messages of faith in more culturally appropriate ways.

Once the church agreed, I began taking lessons and quickly saw how the instrument exemplifies aspects of Zande culture. Whenever I played the instrument, people arrived. Visitors to the nearby mission hospital, students returning from school, and people from the village came to watch, dance, and even play along with me. Rarely was I able to practice without people coming to observe, drawn by the sound of the akpaningba. An additional novelty was that the akpaningba is seldom played as a solo instrument. In performance, three or four players place themselves on alternate sides of the instrument, with one playing the melody while the others play an accompaniment of low, middle, and high ostinatos. The ever-present audience whenever I played, and the interlocking method of the playing, demonstrate the importance of living connected in community to the Azande, a belief valued by many small-scale oral societies (Hiebert 2008, 109–12).

Along with seeking to revitalize the playing of the instrument, I wanted to challenge the church to consider the instrument in its artistic context, the kpaningba genre. When studying the use of local arts in the church, a group of Bible school students chose the kpaningba as an acceptable genre for communication within the church context. They created a kpaningba with lyrics that conveyed a message addressing current felt needs. When they performed at a church gathering, the congregation reacted with enthusiasm, jumping from their seats to join in the singing and dancing. After the presentation, a church leader told me that while most people did not think the kpaningba was for Christians, after observing how the students treated the genre, she was now convinced that traditional genres had their place in the church. A few days later a young man who had attended the performance told me how excited he was to see the students reclaiming the kpaningba for the church.

Encouraged by these words and the actions of initial acceptance, I commissioned a local traditional dance group to perform new kpaningba dances for a group of church leaders. As I worked with the bayango of the group, his desire to relate the lyrics of the songs to the current situation in Banda strengthened my understanding that topics covered in kpaningba songs mirrored what was happening in society. I learned from him that lyrics of a kpaningba are one of the few acceptable ways for people to express criticism in a society that values honoring authorities and maintaining the status quo (Ngalanvutu 2015).



Figure 3. Local traditional dance group performing a kpaningba



Figure 4. Akpaningba as played in the center of a kpaningba

More than twenty church leaders gathered for the performance of six kpaningba dances led by the akpaningba and the bayango. In the dance group, several played gugu, gaza, and anzero as twenty people danced. As soon as the music began, the joyful faces of the church leaders signified their approval. I was amazed when many of these leaders quickly rose from their seats to join in the dancing! At the close of the performance, one of the church leaders shared his observations. He noted that an important cultural identity marker of the Zande people had been

reformed. The joy and unity they experienced that day as Azande engaged with an important part of their culture sank deeply into their hearts.

Thoughts for the Future

The future engagement of the church and the akpaningba is not clear. After my departure in 2015, I was informed that the songs composed for the church gathering and of the local dance group continue to be sung throughout the Banda area. My hope is that the increased unity and joy that people experienced through their involvement with the akpaningba will lead to continued reflection upon the role the instrument plays in the Zande culture, reinforcing community and providing an acceptable means for expressing critique—values important to the sustainability of this ethnolinguistic group. With Azande throughout the region living with poverty, crumbling infrastructure, and general insecurity, the akpaningba's importance increases. Those who join in kpaningba dances experience moments of escape from the harsh realities of life in the Zande area. The trauma-inducing situations the Azande encounter are managed more easily when kpaningba events provide opportunities for participants to express their feelings through playing instruments, dancing, and singing (Atkins 2013, 5–7; Malchiodi 2020, 178–79).

Conclusion

The use of the kpaningba rests between Locked and Shifting or Stressed on adaptations of the Graded Genre Health Assessment scale (GGHA) (Coulter 2011; Schrag 2015, 332; Harris 2017, 110–12). The sound of the instrument, both its melodic and rhythmic characteristics, continue to galvanize this community. The social aspects of a kpaningba enactment connect deeply with the Zande worldview. However, transmission of the tradition to the younger generation seems limited (Schrag and Van Buren 2018, 208). What will be lost in the Zande culture if the instrument and its host genre, the kpaningba, become Dormant or Extinct (GGHA levels 7 and 8)? Experiencing the sense of joy and unity found in participating in a kpaningba is the only way to understand how detrimental the demise of this instrument would be to the Azande. Its role in the culture—drawing people together to dance and sing, expending their energy, releasing their tensions, and setting aside the stresses of daily life—should not be minimized. An acceptable form of criticizing those in authority would be lost, leading to increased frustration and discontent. The challenge remains to encourage all levels of Zande society to value and propagate the instrument as a means of maintaining this cultural heritage for future generations. If active engagement with the akpaningba by the Azande further abates, then an important part of what makes them who they are will be lost.

Note: I invite readers to explore several examples of kpaningba and akpaningba from my personal video archive:

- Ginihe mo nagbata? Traditional dance group performing kpaningba babiama: <https://youtu.be/0sWNNn0jVn8>
- Traditional tuning of the akpaningba: <https://youtu.be/tR1w6Rr9Xys>
- Examples of traditional playing: <https://youtu.be/8ZpO2mNCpXM>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbFGyyDNUqs>

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