

## Summary on field recordings in Bijagós Islands, Guinea Bissau, February – March 2023

Balazs Weyer, ethnomusicologist

### Background

The Bijagós islands is a distinct culture of West Africa. Having been isolated and exempt of colonization makes their music and culture quite different from mainland West Africa and the former Mali Empire territories. It's a vast area territorially, but the population is very scarce and fragmented. The archipelago is roughly composed of 80 islands of various sizes, 20 out of which are inhabited. The overall population of the Bijagós people are altogether roughly 30.000 and around 6.000 of them are living on the main island of Bubaque. This island is relatively modernized that means it lost its archaic nature and traditional communities are not to be found as in the other islands. We have visited 8 islands inhabited of the archipelago. Most islands have only one village, some have two or three at most. The sizes of communities varied between 50 and 300. The people of Bijagós speak a distinct language (also called Bijagós) and have little connection with the mainland or the outside world in general, having limited access to media or boat connections to the mainland.

The music and dances we observed and recorded very archaic formats that are difficult to find around the world these days. Classical African field recordings from 100 years ago, for example that of Hugh Tracey's legendary fieldworks, sound even more modern. As in most archaic African music forms, the music is dominated by percussive instruments and chanting, call and response format songs. The music is functional, it plays the traditional roles of maintaining group cohesion, accompanying manual work or important community events like weddings, funerals, religious rituals, or community memory. The musicmaking still keeps its traditional participatory nature, most of the community takes a part in some form. Male and female musicking is separated in most music and dance occasions – also, some communities are matriarchal, others patriarchal, there seems to be no simple rule on that. Religiously speaking the communities are animistic, although we saw some run-down catholic churches. Besides music and dance, football seems to be the most popular pastime – most of the islands had a football pitch that, given its space, also served as the location of community gatherings.

Most of the villages, except a one or two, are located inside the islands, 30-45 minutes' walk from the coast. The main reason for that seems to be that at a certain point, communities that were located close to the ocean, have hidden inside the islands from slave traders' ships, so when they pass the area, they don't see sign of life worth stopping for and hunt for the people on the islands to sell them as slaves. For this reason, the communities also lost direct everyday connection with the ocean and fish mostly disappeared from their diet. Rice with chicken and goat meat are the most regular meals. Their dresses are a mixture of traditional costumes and second-hand Western clothing (sport kits mainly) from donations.

Although the islands are under mainland Guinea Bissau jurisdiction and public administration, the presence of the state is next to nothing on the islands: no schools, police, health services or any other

public service is available. Communities are mainly self-governed, usually by an informal council of the elderly and/or a person, that is called either “king” or “queen”, in some cases “prefeito”.

Their main source of economic activity is palm oil, palm wine, cashew production and weaving of colourful fabrics, all marketed in Bissau.

## Orango Island

We started our trip by two (relatively) high speed motorboats from the Port of Bissau. The main island of Bubaque took around 3 hours. After spending a night in Bubaque we took a 1-hour trip to the island of Orango.

Orango is one of the biggest inhabited islands of the archipelago and is highly ranked on the informal list of importance in between the islands. The village (tabanka) on the island is called Angagumé, with an approximate population of 350.

As in every island, first we met the leaders of the community to explain our mission and ask for their permission to record their dances and music. In Angagumé, the “king” is called Caetano de Pina. The island is matrimonial.

The legendary leader of the community, respected all through the islands, is Okinca Pampa (ruled from approximately from 1910, died in 1930), who is the main figure behind how the archipelago escaped colonization by Portugal, organizing resistance and finally signing a peace treaty with Portugal. Her tomb is visitable in a hut in Angagumé, among tombs of other former rulers.

The first recording we made on the island was a long, complex epic with music and dance, that served as a re-enactment of the deeds of Okinca Pampa.

The re-enactment was performed by a group of 8 young women in traditional celebratory costumes – one of them acting as Okinca Pampa (her name was Sabado Pereira) accompanied by the other seven and a group of 25-30 other women in regular clothing. They performed repetitive chants and spoken word (parlando) storytelling, while using handheld percussive instruments (rattles and other idiophones) and performing screams. At a point of the story they meet a group led by King Udonca (performed by a men only group) from another community that we weren’t able to identify. By the end of the play Okinca Pampa clearly becomes the leader and King Udonca’s group performs a chicken sacrifice in her benefit (animal sacrifice is still a daily practice in every community of the archipelago). On most of the islands the part of the sacrifice ritual is to touch three religious objects with the sacrificed animal (in some villages the objects are wooden figures, in others its stones of different sizes) and after the sacrifice to smudge them with the blood of the animal. The sacrifice happens with a simple beheading of the chicken and after the act they use the gut of the animal as a tool of fortune telling (colour of the gut is allegedly providing the necessary information).

We have recorded other different dances, for example *Canhocam*, a special ritual of coming-of-age ceremony for young males, and fertility dances of women, but I will go into more detail about those in regards of other islands.

We have visited the tomb of Okinca Pampa and in the evening we have observed a celebration of another queen, the late *Okinca Acú*. (Okinca meaning queen). The occasion was unclear – it clearly wasn't a funeral, as she passed away in 2015, but it recalled elements of one. The most likely answer is that it was either her birthday (she was born on 19 February in 1935 and we visited the island on 22 February) or a celebration of her spirit – in animistic communities spirits are in constant connection with the living, guiding and safeguarding them. A picture of Okinca Acú was presented at the event, while different families gathered around. Different families were wearing different colours, as if coded or uniformed - we have counted 13 different big families. They were visibly separated and while all participating in the celebration, they usually danced in separate circles. The music here was provided from a computer, the most popular style of music played is traditional music in a kind of remixed/electronic versions, called *kansaré* and/or *kusundé*. I have talked to a son and also a grandson of Okinca Acú, who explained that these occasions are meant to be happy, even if the dead are celebrated but at that points the grandson seemed clearly moved. Dances were mainly semi-organized circle dances.

As a white man on in a matrimonial community, I was put out of a lot of curiosity that anywhere in Western Europe would be considered abusive, but it wasn't, it was a natural expression of curiosity towards the different, the other I represented. Women and families were competing for me dancing with them, touching my skin as if trying if it's real, and shouting "branco, branco!" (white, white!) as I they watched my pathetic attempts trying to engage in their dances. As a strong sign of matrimonial traditions, I was also approached by men, as messengers of their wives, offering to spend the night at their houses. Drinking alcohol was a part of the event – while daytime they usually drink palm wine, here there were different strong spirits made available.

## Island of Uno

After Orango we have visited the nearby island of Uno, Ilha de Uno. There we visited a village (tabanka) of Cabuno Grande. The whole island is inhabited by around 6.000. Cabuno Grande is considered a big tabanka.

The tabanka was found about 40-45 minutes' walk from the coast. Vegetation on this part was more dense, then on Orango. Architecture is very similar, huts made of clay.

First we have again met the council of the elderly, who sacrificed a chicken in our honour and we shared some palm wine in a sign of goodwill.

We recorded sessions of the bombolom, a percussive instrument of a horizontally positioned, hollowed out tree trunk of large size (around 1 meter in length and a diameter of 50 cm), filled with

flinders and beaten by two sticks. This is used as a tool of communication, a bit similar to church bells in Europe. Although, unlike its Western African counterpart, the balafon, can't be used to express complex messages, it is more a messenger of an urgency, or a community meeting. As we were told, whatever you are doing, you have to stop and go to the meeting place following its sign, whether it's an urgency, a celebration, a community meeting. Bombolom was presented to us at almost all of the islands we have visited, in various sizes.

This island is patriarchal. The council of the elderly was exclusively containing men. One sign of this was they forbid us to record or even witness the fertility dance of women. However, I managed to record a good part of it with my phone while the rest of the group was discussing with the elderly, but they made me stop when they found out. The fertility dance included women of various ages, stomping in indefinite and seemingly unorganized circles. They are dancing bowed forward in about 30 degrees, carrying branches of trees or bushes and censers. While the men were forbidding us to be there, the women didn't seem to be concerned, rather proud to perform in front of men.

Another dance we observed on many islands, but most prominently on Ilha de Uno, was the canhocam the coming-of-age celebration of young men. We were told that when they reach the age of adulthood, boys are spent to one of the nearby desert islands for 6 months to survive on their own. This is meant to prepare them to life. Their return is followed by the act of circumcision, that is an active practice on every island (while mutilation of women is not, although is still in practice in part of the mainland, despite the legal ban). When they return, the canhocam is the symbolic initiation ceremony and dance where they, surrounded by chanting young females, who haven't given birth yet. They dance and run around imitating certain activities of life like hunting, fighting, wearing wooden masks (called *djassakas*) that symbolize animals, most frequently ox, shark or birds. At the end of the ceremony an older woman (we haven't confirmed that information, but possibly their mother) symbolically breastfeed them for the last time, symbolizing letting them go. At the end of the ritual, the dancers roll around and wallow in the dust in front of the elderly – which might be a gesture of submission, but that's only speculation.

A similar masked male dance is the Baca Bruto in which they impersonate only cows, oxes and bulls. These are louder dances with a lot of percussion and rattle instruments, the men imitating a hunt, while others stand around them, chanting and clapping. Most of the dances are very long sessions, this can take up to hours, and since it's an intense physical effort, the ones lasting the longest gain special respect.

After dark the ritual turned to what seemed more to be a spontaneous party, with women leading the dances and music. Call and response songs and percussion dominated, women danced in similar circles as for the fertility dance, carrying branches, wooden swords and bows. These dances include the *danca de defuntu* (the dance of the dead) that are only performed by women.

Besides the music and dances, we also observed everyday activities like collecting palm wine, grinding palm kernels. We have interviewed a traditional healer/doctor, who in his youth was sent to university by the community in Bissau to learn Western medicine, but claimed to use the traditional medical

# MARIMBA



knowledge more. He said he is serving 4-5 islands as the only doctor around and is concerned by his own age (he was in his 50s) as there is no one he could transfer his knowledge to.

Balazs Weyer, ethnomusicologist



Ação financiada pela União Europeia.  
Ação cofinanciada e gerida pelo Camões, I.P.