

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GJ-22
Traditional Crafts

14 October 1972
P.O. Box 4080
Dar es Salaam,
Tanzania.

Mr. R.H. Nolte,
Institute of Current World Affairs,
535 Fifth Avenue,
New York, New York 10017.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The urban migrant is generally thought of as being young, adventurous, unskilled and jobless. He is further described as one who is seeking to make a quick fortune so that he might return to his bride in a grand fashion. Very recently I have been meeting many "migrants" who do not conform to this stereotype. They are elderly, married, skilled, employed (self) and although one might feel them to be adventurous, they would be more aptly described as opportunists. Furthermore, in contrast to the younger people, they find the city to be unattractive, boring and much too expensive. These elderly men maintain close contact with their relatives upcountry and use every opportunity to return and continue the "old way" of doing things. Two of these wazee (elders) were kind enough to take time from their busy schedules to be interviewed: Bwana M'Kopoka Linjenje, a basket weaver and Saidi Simbamlima, a traditional drummer. In spite of having to chase around town in order to meet with these two men I thoroughly enjoyed our contacts. I was also pleased by their invitations to visit them in their home villages.

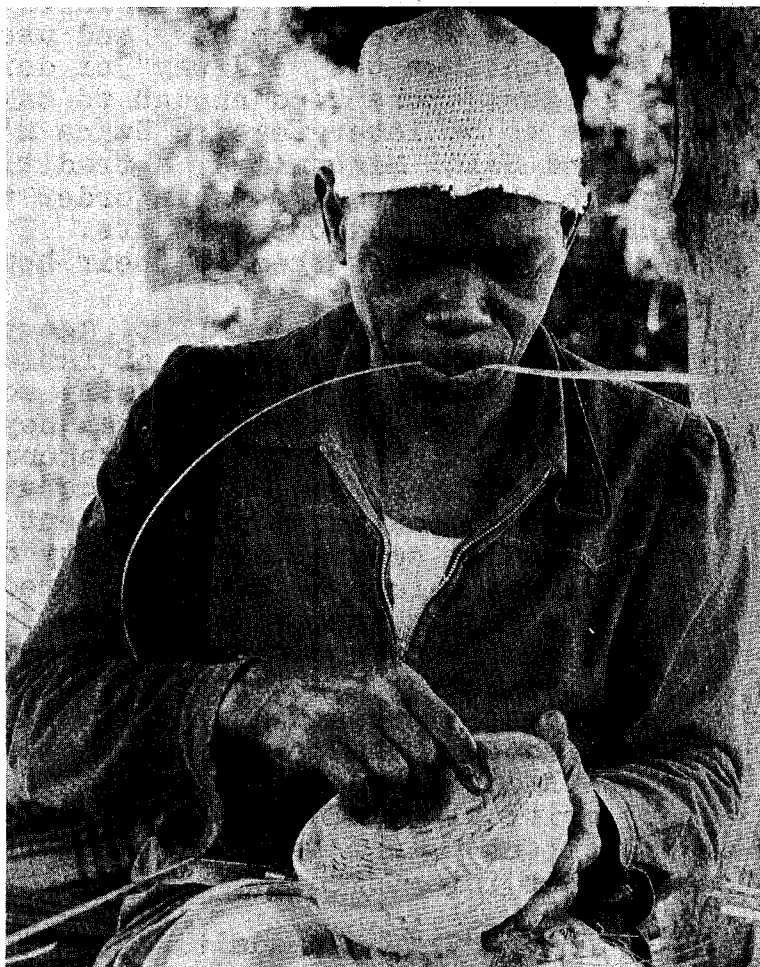
Bwana M'Kopoka Linjenje, age 50, was born in Mozambique not too far from the boundary of Tanzania. However, at a very early age, he moved with his family across the border into the southern district of Mtwara where they have lived ever since. Unlike most of the men of his Wamakonde tribe, M'kopoka did not pursue his father's line of work--carving. He explained that although he was considered an excellent apprentice by his father--having produced several high quality carvings--he never-the-less lost interest before he was considered ready for commercial ventures. It took a long time for his father to accept the fact that his son found no enjoyment in working with the ebony woods. When questioned by his father as to how he would earn a living, he very eagerly presented a series of articles which he had woven out of bamboo in the privacy of his little hut. For almost a year, he had been teaching himself the art of basketry. After a very critical examination by his father, it was decided that he had talent and was free to pursue his interest full time without further interference.

Bwana M'Kopoka admits that it has been only within the past sixteen years that he has considered himself a "fundi mkuu"

(master craftsman). Within this period of time he has mastered the majority of the different weaves. As we talked his hands, in perpetual motion, moved deftly over several strands of reeds. By the end of our first session, he had produced four small mats which depicted the four popular weaves: matting, lattice, coil and wattle. He mentioned that from these four basic patterns, one can make an infinite number of weaves. Upon his insistence I attempted one of the simple patterns taught to children, especially small girls, as an introduction to the skill of basketry. After several minutes without success in duplicating this weave, I was summarily dismissed by Bwana Linjenje. He asserted that like most of his youngsters, I was far too impatient. "When I was learning," he said, "I could sit in one spot for eight hours practising one pattern." He would become so engrossed in his work that he would forget time and food.

In answer to a question on teaching, the weaver replied that he had ruled out the possibility of his own children becoming weavers, but at the present time he had two very industrious young men in Mtwara who are showing great promise towards becoming master craftsmen. He also related that he is called upon quite frequently by rural school districts to give demonstrations. Many of the rural schools are offering basketry to their students in hopes of rekindling interest in this waning traditional skill.

In addition to teaching, Bwana Linjenje has been commissioned by the National Museum of Tanzania to reproduce a series of traditional articles usually found in a typical Tanzanian household. The museum officials, like many other Tanzanians, are sensing that the art of basketry is slowly dying out and have set out to record as much as possible before all is lost. In order to supplement his income, the museum officials have agreed to allow the weaver to sell some of his articles to the general public.



Most of the objects which Bwana Linjenje produces are made from bamboo which is plentiful and cheap in Tanzania. He explained that the bamboo is cut when the shoots are relatively young (6-7 months old). The pliant quality of the young plant allows the weaver to twist each strand with a greater range of motion without fear of too many of them breaking. He added that most of the weavers have special shaded places in which they store the cut bamboo so that it can maintain as much of its moisture as possible. In order to make the bamboo ready for weaving, its outer and inner layers are shaved away with an extremely sharp knife. This job is usually relegated to the apprentice. Bwana Linjenje showed me several old scars on his hands which indicated that he had not been too careful in the past when shaving the bamboo. Upon completion of this stripping phase the bamboo is soaked in either water or colored dyes (made from the bark of a tree) for a short period. The bamboo is now ready for use. To hide the exposed ends of the finished product, a second reed-like plant, which is found in most dry areas of the country, is looped around its outer edges. This "creeping skin" serves to hold the weave in place while giving the article a polished appearance.

As we talked about the variety of articles being produced at the present time, Bwana Linjenje became very concerned. It seems as if his customers are beginning to place more and more demands upon him to change to the latest fashions. They feel he can no longer resort solely to the natural dyes and to materials like bamboo. Their demands are for the bright synthetic dyes and the more durable materials such as plastic and nylon. He feels that although his high quality of craftsmanship has guaranteed him a certain market, in the near future he will have to adapt. He has however, found some consolation in the fact that the tourists remain attracted to his present style.

As we talked about changes, the weaver related that the biggest change he has had to make over the past few years is in his work-family relationship. He no longer can travel around while leaving his wife to tend the farm. She now accompanies him on all his trips.

Mama Linjenje although present during all our sessions seemed content to sit in the background and just listen. Every now and then she would muffle a chuckle when the pitch of her husband's voice changed when he attempted to project. As her husband worked she kept him supplied with raw materials. However, when there was a pause in his activity she would pull out some of her own projects. Like most African women I have met when in the presence of their husbands, Mama Linjenje never volunteered any information nor joined in the conversation. When I directed questions to her, she would first eye her husband and then proceed to speak. She took extreme care not to contradict or demean her husband. I found her to be witty, informative and very curious about the world around her.

Mama Linjenje related that she became very lonely for her husband whenever he travelled for more than a three week period--which was quite frequently. She felt the only way possible for her to be able to have the company of her husband was to learn more about basketry, that is, beyond the elementary level usually taught by parents to youngsters. After a period of six months, she reminisced, and after one of his most exhausting safaris, she told him what she had accomplished in her



spare time and related how she could be helpful to him as he moved around to the different urban centers. In anticipation of his response concerning the children and the shamba she had foresightedly obtained a promise from her relatives to attend to both during her absence. Mama Linjenje had presented her case so well that the bwana acquiesced without too much resistance. He later told me that she has been most helpful--not only in their working relationship--but also by virtue of her company especially during the long evenings. She has now been working with her husband for one year. She very proudly showed me samples of several articles which she had made over the past year: sleeping mat (matete), winnowing bas-

ket (ungu), and a large tapestry (ulembo ukutani). They both agree that within the next year Mama Linjenje's products will be good enough to be sold in the market.

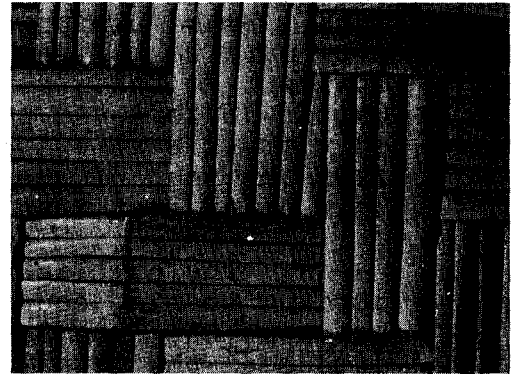
During the second day of our interview I noticed that Bwana Linjenje had a slight limp as he moved around his outdoor hut. On the previous day he had not moved from his sitting position while being questioned--3½ hours. As a result of a series of freak accidents, M'Kopoka had to have one of his legs amputated. It was replaced by a wooden one. He related that back in 1964 during an arts festival an infected boil on his leg, having been healed for only a week, was re-infected as a result of him scratching it on a jutting nail in one of the booths. Unable to leave right away to get medical attention it became seriously diseased. He later had to

Basic Patterns

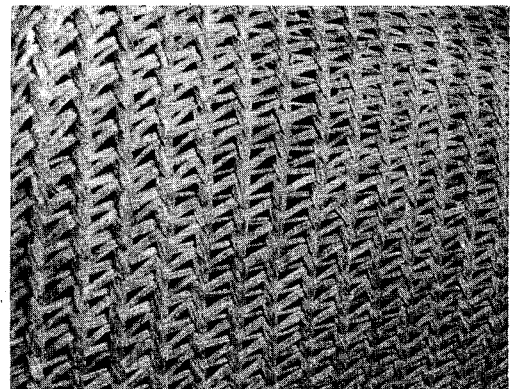


Lft: Bwana Linjenje using natural dyes.

matting

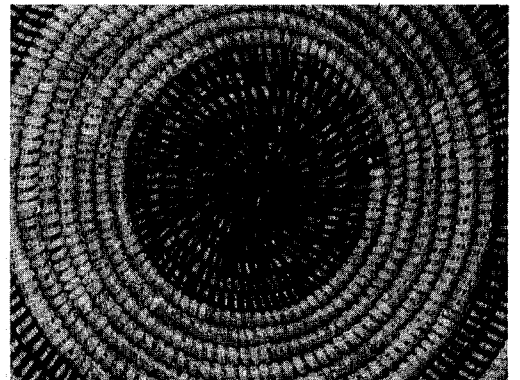


lattice

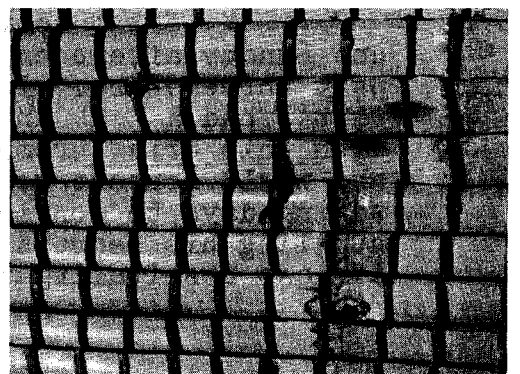


Lft: Mama taking care of some of the essentials

coil



wattle



be hospitalized and after one year of unsuccessful treatment the leg was removed--and hence, the limp. Without going into much detail Bwana Linjenje attributed his accident as well as the aftermath to the jealousy of some of his neighbors back in Mtwara. He felt that they had consulted the local mchawi (witch-doctor) and paid him to work his evil juju. He asserted that this sometimes happens when one gets too far removed from the rest of the community economically and socially. With this brief statement he refused to pursue the matter any further.

The highlight of Bwana Linjenje's career thus far, according to him, occurred in 1968 when he won the best weaver award at the Saba Saba (birth of TANU) Celebrations. As we discussed the details of the celebrations he beckoned to his wife to dig out the certificate denoting his award. But, before she had completed the task, he proudly quoted the lengthy inscription written on its cover. It was signed by the Provincial Commissioner of the Coast Region.

For the most part, the interviews with Bwana Linjenje although productive and enjoyable were somewhat passive. At times I could barely hear the soft-spoken weaver. Such was not the case with Bwana Saidi Simbamlima, the drummer. He dominated our sessions. With one question the entire interview took form--Simbamlima lecturing and me listening. During certain instances his vibrant and forceful bass voice could be heard above the roar of overhead jet airplanes and the din of passing freight trains. Our meetings however, were so exciting and interesting that I continued to visit him after I had finished my interviews. He had extended me an open invitation to visit him at his house and I had willingly accepted.

As his name implies in Kiswahili, "mountain lion" Simbamlima is described by his friends and neighbors as: "The one that got away and became domesticated--almost."

During the week I spent with Bwana Simbamlima I counted no less than seventy-five people who just happened to pass by and wanted to say "jambo". Even though they would end up spending the entire morning or afternoon it did not interfere with the drummer's performance. Many of the passers-by who seemed a little depressed when they arrived soon livened up in response to the gaiety which Simbamlima evinced. All who brought problems be they domestic or otherwise--complexity notwithstanding--were given advice by the "lion".

My first contact with Bwana Simbamlima took place on one Sunday afternoon through a friend who has known him for the past three years. I had casually mention to my friend one day that I had a real interest in traditional African drums. And with this brief prompting my friend set out to find a drum maker who would consent to talk with an "mgeni" (visitor). After taking days to convince Simbamlima that I was not interested in stealing his secrets, he finally arranged for me to see him. African hospitality in general is most genial, but my first

visit to Simbamlima's house was overwhelmingly cordial. I felt like a long lost relative. On one occasion I was even asked by Simbamlima whether or not I had truly returned home for good. He added: "Your sisters and brothers have missed you very much."

Before our first interviewing session commenced, we were abruptly interrupted by four men who were visible distressed. After a lengthy apology they asked Simbamlima if they could speak



to him in privacy. Spending at least twenty minutes with these men inside his house, the drummer finally emerged followed by the group. Judging from the smiles and the loud laughter I assumed that the "lion" had succeeded in his unofficial social service duties. He had agreed to accompany these men to their community as they were participating in a special ngoma (dance) ceremony which needed his service. The community elders had sent this delegation to elicit help from the noted drummer. According to their reports, they were engaged in a spiritual cleansing ngoma, but the drumming ensemble which they had hired for the occasion was not making any progress towards communicating with the proper spirits. Their patient who was undergoing the spiritual cleansing had not stirred from her twenty-four hour trance and as Simbamlima had had many successes in the past they hoped he would once again win out over the evil "machawi" who had cast the spell. At the time I did not realize that I had been discussed in their tete-a-tete. Simbamlima had announced to them that he would go only under the condition that I be allowed to accompany him. Excited?--I was fascinated.

Simbamlima has lived in Dar es Salaam for approximately twenty-two years. In spite of his excellent reputation back home as an exceptionally fine drummer, when he arrived in Dar es Salaam he had to resort to selling coffee on the streets in order to earn a living. While telling me about these early days in Dar he produced an Arabian coffee pot and several small demi-tasse cups which he had used during his early work experience in the city. He also produced two metallic cups which he used to attract customers by clicking them together in a rhythmic fashion. He recounted that although his coffee was not as good as that of some of the other vendors he nevertheless had a large clientele who looked forward to this daily visits.

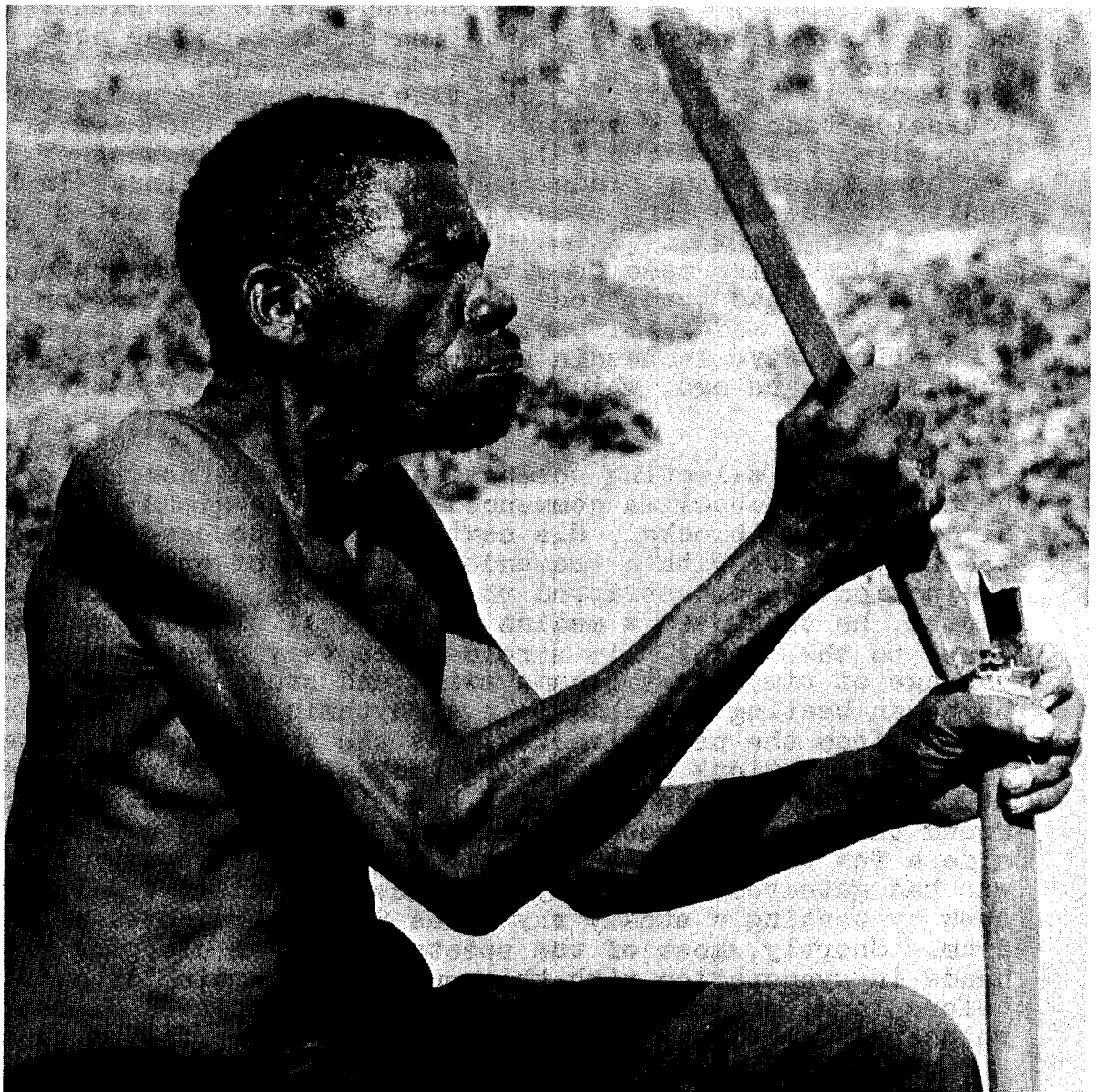
"These early years on the streets were very important to me," he reflected. He felt the contacts and the familiarization have been invaluable over the years. It was also an easier way for him to adjust to the demands of city living as he had here-to-fore been living on a farm with his parents. During his period of adjustment two of his five children were born. At the present time two of his children are married and two are studying the Koran. The last born is attending primary school.

Within a short time (3 years) after his arrival in Dar es Salaam, Simbamlima recalled that he began getting calls to play for weekend dances by the locals. Subsequently, his drumming prowess began to spread, but it did not reach its peak until the time of the Independence Celebrations of 1969. During one of the festivities he was crowned by the President as the top traditional drummer in the area. He was presented with a check for two hundred shillings and a huge trophy. "From this date," he mused, "there has hardly been a weekend or a holiday which has found me idle." Having since limited his schedule to

a more reasonable pace, Simbamlima now commits himself to only three or four sessions per month. "At one point," he said, "I was playing as much as eight times in one month. Many stints," he continued, "would last as long as three days and as the chief drummer I would have to play continuously." According to the "lion", dances in Dar es Salaam usually begin on Saturday and continue until Sunday evening, whereas, in the rural areas, the dances commence on Friday and quite often do not end until Tuesday. Simbamlima would remain alert during these sessions by drinking large quantities of the local drink called "gongo."

Eight years ago Simbamlima decided that he would supplement his income by making drums for other drummers in the area. In the past he had made drums simply for his own use. His father a very popular musician, had taught him and his brothers to make them at a very early age. His father's philosophy was that a good drummer knows his instrument intimately and one of the best ways to become familiar with it is to be able to make one.

Great care
is taken to
keep tools
in top work-
ing order.



Without too much prodding, Simbamlima consented to make a drum during our interviews so that he could demonstrate the traditional technique and style. He told me that the finish product would be a gift to his "brother" to take back to the States. I found out later that it is very unusual for top drummers like Simbamlima to share their drums with non-drummers or strangers.

I arrived promptly two days later at our agreed time-- 8 am. Simbamlima had already started on the drum, but stopped immediately so that we might have morning tea. While we were finishing our tea and ndazi (local pastry) the "lion" explained that he had been to a neighbor's compound that morning and had cut a coconut tree from which the drum would be made. Judging from the size of the tree, he felt he could probably get at least four drums of a reasonable size. Most drum makers prefer a harder wood because of its durability. Some of the more popular trees include: mkongo, mninge, mvule, mtanga and msolo. In a recent government directive however, it was noted that these woods can only be used by first obtaining the proper certification from government. At present coconut woods are plentiful and cheap. As we continued, Simbamlima emphasized the need for well-honed tools. There are seven basic implements which most craftsmen carry in their kit: tupa (file), chapio (scoop), patasi (chisel), tezo (adz), msumeno (saw), twankio (pounder with cutting edge) and kisu (knife). Simbamlima spends most of his evening hours sharpening blades and tightening handles. In his community it is also very prestigious to own a fine set of tools.

Drums are made to a variety of specifications usually in keeping with the traditions of the particular tribe for which the drum is being made. Simbamlima reported that he has made drums as small as five inches in height to one, made for a chief a number of years ago, which measured five feet from the base to the head.

After selecting the best areas of the coconut tree which he had cut, Simbamlima commenced sawing the giant log into several cylindrical blocks. His next step was to remove the bark with the heavy adz. With a tremendous display of strength and coordination he soon stripped the bark away. With this part completed, he then used a medium size chisel with its mallet to give shape to the block. His strokes were very precise and with the passage of time, they became swift and staccatic. Eventually, he began beating the chisel in a rhythmic fashion which attracted people from the nearby market. As the crowd grew in size, the "lion's" gyrations and pounding increased in scope and tempo. At one point he leaped up from his sitting position and ran around the block of wood pausing now and then to give an edge or side a few taps with the patasi. One of the younger spectators, who had gathered four empty tin cans, joined in the spontaneous show by beating a steady rhythm as Simbamlima moved around the drum. Shortly, most of the spectators began clapping their hands in syncopation with the sounds of the tin "drums". However, before long, one of the village elders approached Simbamlima and whispered something in his ear. From the expression on Simba-

mlima's face most of us sensed that something was wrong, and, as quickly as the spectacle had started, it stopped. The two men then walked towards the "lions" house. The crowd took this movement as their cue to leave.

Later in the week, while retelling the events of that particular day, Simbamlima reported that someone had apprised the elder of his intention of making a drum for a mgeni. This angered the elder because he had sold Simbamlima the tree--at a very reduced price--thinking it would be for personal use. The elder felt he had been deceived by his friend. Simbamlima was particularly upset, not only because he had been exposed, but also because this elder is known to be an expert in a certain brand of juju for which there are few remedies. It was very important that the matter be cleared immediately.

It was evident that Simbamlima had said the right things to the elder while they were in the house, for when they emerged at the end of twenty-five minutes, they both were smiling and exchanging small talk. Simbamlima had explained to the elder that he had no intentions of "selling" the drum, but was simply demonstrating the basics of drum making to his friend. He went on to explain that when he arrived at the more skillful phases of the operation he had planned to elicit the advice and service of the elder since he too makes drums. The mzee felt this to be a plausible explanation and agreed to participate. As the two men settled down to their "joint" project, the remaining on-lookers sighed with relief that their friend, the "lion", had once again triumphed.

As the elder began to demonstrate he became so involved that he sent one of the youngsters home to fetch his personal tools. Instructing the lad as to which tools to bring, he then took his hat and placed it on the head of his messenger. The hat was a signal to the elder's wife that it was okay to give the tools to the lad. Without it, he would have been chased out of the house.

The elder has been making drums since early boyhood. When asked how old he was, however, he could only respond by pointing to one of the youngsters in the crowd and saying that he was probably the same age during World War I. He remembers being hidden in the bush by his mother as the fighting took place in his village. The mzee, like his father and grandfather, is teaching his sons the art of drum making. He is also instructing twelve young men whom he has signed on as apprentices. He teaches at his upcountry shamba which is located one hundred miles from Dar es Salaam. His wife (second) and twelve children remain there to tend the crops and the chickens.

When asked how many drums he had made during his lifetime, the elder just laughed and said that I probably could not count that high. He specializes in making sets of drums rather than producing individual pieces. For the Wazaramo tribe for whom he mainly makes drums, he generally prepares five sets of



Stripping the bark



Using a hole to stabilize the drum.



Hollowing out process

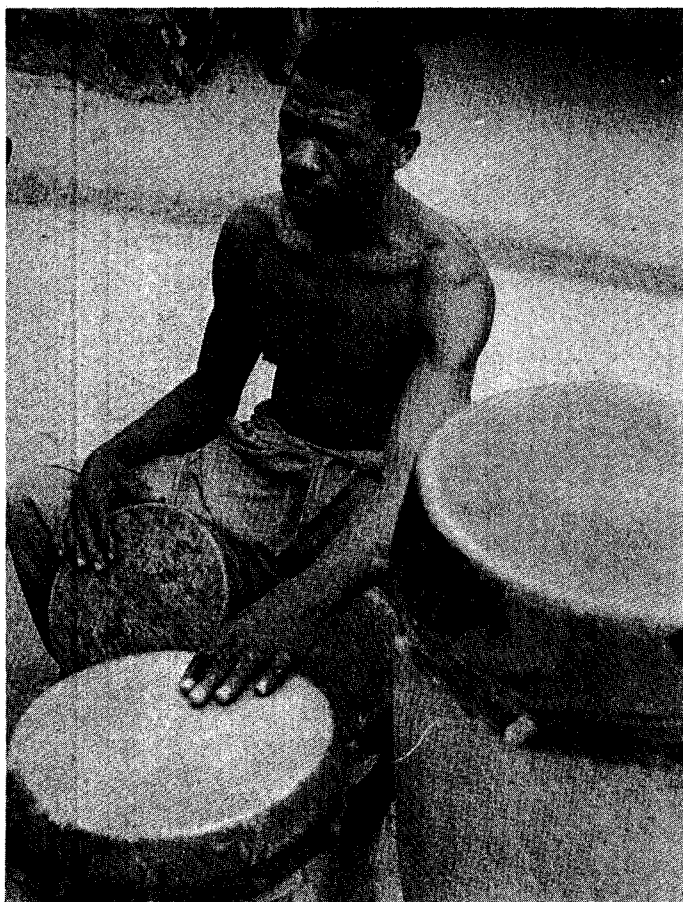


The elder shaping the base.

drums to correspond to the five ritual dances which they use during their ngomas. There are usually seven drums in each set. They come in three sizes: small (ngezi), medium (kibige) and the largest (nditi).

With the two men sharing the remaining work on the drum, it took form within a very short period. After chiseling the outside to the desired shape, a base was then formed on the bottom. While the elder completed the base Bwana Simbamlima began digging a hole in the ground. The two men then placed the shaped wood--base down--into the hole and commenced hollowing out the insides with the twankio. The thickness of the walls are calculated on the basis of the length of the drum. When I asked if there was some formula that they used, they both laughed and said no; they just knew when to stop gouging. After this hollowing out process and after sanding the entire structure, they bored holes around the top approximately 1½ inches from the edge. Pegs were then cut to fit into these holes. The final step entailed taking a processed skin and stretching it over the top and securing it with the pegs. Any animal skin may be used. The whole process, including the interruptions, had taken no more than four hours.

Although I have not as yet received the drum as had been promised by Simbamlima, I am never-the-less grateful to him for this very interesting demonstration and also his insistence that I accompany him to the ngoma. I will perhaps write about the ritual in a future Newsletter.



Sincerely,
George Jones
George Jones