

## Bakongo roots from the D. R. Congo

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I will never forget the first time I heard the group 'Konono # 1' from Kinshasa. It was back in the fall of 1995, when I working in a record store in Cambridge, MA. One afternoon a friend-and fellow music enthusiast- came in to browse through whatever new releases had arrived that day, and as he made his way through our large collection of African music, he pulled out a CD called 'Musiques Urbaines à Kinshasa'. He handed me the disc and said, 'if you haven't heard this yet, put it on before you leave tonight'. A little later, when the store was empty, I cracked open the case, and dropped the disc into the stereo. I listened to 'Musiques Urbaines à Kinshasa' for the next four hours straight, turning up the volume every twenty minutes. By closing time it felt like 'Le Tout Puissant Konono # 1' had replaced my brain; the bass-Likembe runs rippled through my nervous system, every cymbal crash soothed the muscles in my neck, and the rhythmic accents of the whistle made my ears prick up like a hunting dog's.

When I finally made it to Kinshasa, in November of 2003, I hassled my hosts, and everyone else I spoke with, until I found a cassette vendor who could scratch my itch for more 'urban' roots music from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. My obsessive-and I imagine, annoying- behavior led me first to a market stall in Matonge (the neighborhood that has long been Kinshasa's musical heart) with shelves full of cassettes, mostly of religious recordings.



One of the best of the batch I picked up in Matonge was this cassette by 'l'Orchestre Yamba Yamba Beto Ba'. The group was founded in Kinshasa by Makengo Makape, and has been together for several decades. Their sound is rooted in the musical traditions of the Bantandu people, who are a subgroup of the Bakongo. (The roughly 10 million souls who consider themselves Bakongo are spread between the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of the Congo, and Angola. The Bakongo are a blend of different peoples who, over the centuries, have assimilated the Kongo culture and language: an assimilation that started with political domination of the region by the Kongo Kingdom in the 15th century. Some of the many Bakongo subgroups are the Mayombe, the Bantandu, the Laari, the Vili, and the Bazombe-Konono's repertoire is based in Bazombe musical traditions. Each of these groups speaks their own dialect of Kikongo.) The 'Orchestre Yamba Yamba Beto Ba's grooves are built around the guitars of Maitre Makape and his colleague Lutumba, with a Likembe holding down the bass, and embroidered by bells, rattles, and percussion.

↪ [l'Orchestre Yamba Yamba Beto Ba 'Nkumbo Ya Makengo'](#)

↪ [l'Orchestre Yamba Yamba Beto Ba 'Makengo Nkunga'](#)

The next, and most rewarding stop, on my musical scavenger hunt through greater Kinshasa was at the main market in Selembao, which is a dense suburb, southwest of downtown Kinshasa. My friend Jean-Paul took me to 'Edition Mongo Kibila', the retail outlet of Papa Ya Nsiala. From ten feet away I knew that Papa Ya Nsiala had what I was looking for. His shop consisted of a countertop, cassette deck, amplifier, and huge speakers at the front of a bar. Under the countertop were boxes with dozens of cassettes, and each time he put a new one into the deck, the patrons in the bar expressed their approval with loud cry's and wobbly dance moves.

Papa Ya Nsiala was born in December of 1956, in the village of Kevuka, in the Lukaya District, which is part of the Bas-Congo Province (which translates as the 'Lower Congo Province'-the name refers to the river- and is also the home of the Bakongo people). He came to Kinshasa, after his father died, in 1969, and was taken in by his uncle Alamoule, who was a music producer who had worked with Tabu Ley Rochereau and Franco. Ya Nsiala soon found work on the production line of the Phillips vinyl factory, which pressed the 45 rpm singles, and 33 rpm lps, that kept Kinshasa 'on the good foot'. Even before Papa Ya Nsiala arrived in Kinshasa he was crazy about Bakongo traditional music, what in Kinshasa is called 'le folklore'.

In 1970, after seeing an inspiring performance by a 12-year-old musician by the name of Koko Shando, who was also from the Bas-Congo Province, Papa Ya Nsiala decided to get into music production. With the help of his uncle, he opened his first stall in Selembao, and released his first recording of Koko Shando. Almost forty years later, Papa Ya Nsiala, under his label 'Edition Mongo Kibila' (with the exception of a few titles under an ancillary label), has released just over 200 different titles of Bakongo 'folklore'. He told me that the most popular cassettes in his catalog have sold over 10,000 copies.



Koko Shando's best selling release from the late 1990s, which is also Papa Ya Nsiala's best-selling production, is 'Kibwisa Muini'. It features the Likembe driven sound that he performs at weddings, funerals, and baptisms throughout Selembao, greater Kinshasa, and the Bas-Congo region.

↪ [Koko Shando 'Nkinsangu'](#)

↪ [Koko Shando 'Luzolo Luntima'](#)

Another group that Papa Ya Nsiala has been working with throughout the last ten years is 'l'Orchestre Maita 1er de Ya Garry', a band that has 15 members, and are based in the Gafani neighborhood of Selembao. They have released three cassettes on 'Edition Mongo Kibila', but their best remains their first release 'Lumata'.



The group's sound is similar to that of 'l'Orchestre Yamba Yamba Beto Ba', anchored by some nice rhythm guitar playing, and two Likembes.

↪ [l'Orchestre Maita 1er de Ya Garry 'Sala Bisala'](#)

↪ [l'Orchestre Maita 1er de Ya Garry 'Ya Kambo'](#)

As Papa Ya Nsiala told me, 'the new dances of Wazekwa, Werrason, and all of the modern musicians, capture the attention of the public for a few months, then disappear. But the 'folklore' that we produce and promote stays for years'.

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