



A pair of congas. The Cuban conga drum is an adaptation of a similar drum from the Congo region.

Photo by Añoranza.

which is the major thoroughfare through Central Africa, grew from a modest colonial settlement to a major urban center of over 11.5 million people, and is now the third largest city in Africa (after Cairo and Lagos) and the most populous French-speaking city in the world.

Music associated with the Lower Congo region has been very influential in several realms. Kinshasa was home to an early recording industry, and the cosmopolitan city gave birth to a unique guitar-based pop music (called Congolese **rumba** or **soukous**), which is one of the most widely appreciated musical styles in Africa as well as in the wider **Francophone** (French-speaking) world beyond. As the region was a primary source for slaves intended for Brazil and Cuba, Congolese (and neighboring Angolan) culture left important traces: the Brazilian berimbau (bow struck with a stick) has roots in Angola, and the Cuban **conga** drum is an adaptation of a similar drum from the Congo region (generically called “ngoma” in central Africa). Titos Somba, a brilliant musician from the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), introduced Congolese drumming in the U.S. in the 1970s, teaching and touring extensively. And a famous nineteenth-century gathering place for slaves in New Orleans that featured dancing and

drumming was called Congo Square.⁴

The [Niger River](#) is the third longest in Africa and bears great importance in West African history and cultural life. With its source in Guinea, it flows northward through Bamako to Timbuktu in Mali and then bends southeast into the delta region in Nigeria. Timbuktu, by virtue of its location at the northernmost part of the Niger, connected the West African interior with the outside world. Ancient Mali (also known as the **Mande** empire) was located along the stretch of the Niger River that crosses between Guinea and Mali. By controlling the flow of gold northward, and Mediterranean and North African goods southward, the Mali empire became the largest and wealthiest in all of West Africa in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. Its royal court musicians and oral historians, called **jelis** in the Maninka language and known more generally as **griots** (pronounced gree-ohs), are among the most renowned artists in all of Africa for their musical virtuosity and historical knowledge.

The [Zambezi River](#), the fourth longest in Africa, has its source in southern DRC, flowing south through Angola and Zambia, marking off the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe, and then into Mozambique where it flows into the Indian Ocean. The region marked off by the Zambezi in the north and the Limpopo River in the south (which separates South Africa from Zimbabwe) has been home to the **Shona** people since about the tenth century. They are the ones probably responsible for building the impressive stone structures marking Great Zimbabwe, the capital of the kingdom of Zimbabwe (thirteenth–fifteenth centuries). Shona, the predominant group in Zimbabwe, are renowned for their mastery of the **mbira**, which is a **lamellophone** (an instrument with tines or lamellae, like the metal prongs on a rake, plucked by the fingers) first documented in print in 1589 by a Christian missionary.⁵

A series of large lakes in East Africa known as the [Great Lakes](#) attracted a dense population that formed kingdoms and states, some of which gave their names to the post-colonial nations in which they are located: Rwanda, Burundi, and Buganda (Uganda). The lakes include, from south to north: Lake Malawi (which drains into the Zambezi River), Lake Tanganyika, the world’s second largest in volume (which drains into the Congo River system), and Lake Victoria Nyanza (which drains into the

gaining popularity after the Civil War. Their repertory added jubilee songs (based on black spirituals), and eventually their humor could be seen as subtly poking fun at their white audience.

In the 1890s an African-American performance troupe—Orpheus McAdoo’s Virginia Concert Company and Jubilee Singers (renamed Minstrel, Vaudeville and Concert Company in 1895) toured the British Isles, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand to great acclaim. McAdoo was a veteran of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, which was formed in the 1870s at the historically black Fisk University for the purpose of arranging spirituals for the concert stage to tour and raise funds for the school. Inspired by McAdoo, urban middle-class black South Africans (teachers, artisans, petty traders), Christian mission school graduates, and migrant workers in industrial mining camps formed song and dance troupes, combining African-American, European, and local Zulu styles of singing.

Choir leader and composer Rueben T. Caluza and his choir at the Ohlange Institute, one of the first black colleges in South Africa (established by African National Congress founder John L. Dube), were an important force in the 1920s in developing this style. The choir’s tours attracted large crowds that appreciated their dance movements and topical Zulu lyrics in a ragtime style. In the early 1930s, Caluza went to the U.S. and earned his Bachelor’s degree at Hampton Institute (Virginia) and Master’s degree at Columbia University, returning to South Africa in 1936 to lead the School of Music at Adams College near Durban.¹⁰⁸

A piece called “Mbube” (“Lion”) composed by **Solomon Linda** and recorded by his group the Original Evening Birds in 1939 was a major turning point and set a new standard for the genre, which by then was called **isicathamiya** (“step lightly”). The group enjoyed much popularity, and “Mbube” was a hit in South Africa, lending its name as a sub-genre within isicathamiya. American folk singer Pete Seeger later heard their record and recorded a version with his group The Weavers in 1952, calling it “Wimowe,” a mishearing of a Zulu language line in the song. In 1961 The Tokens, who learned it from the Weavers’ recording, released a version, called “The Lion Sleeps Tonight,” which went to number one on the U.S. pop charts. Many more versions were recorded,

and it was featured in the 1994 Disney film *The Lion King* and the 1997 original Broadway cast album. But Solomon Linda had sold the song outright to his record label (without a proper contract) and would not collect the millions of dollars in royalties that later recordings would earn. An exposé in *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2002 and a documentary shortly thereafter, however, enabled Linda’s family to recoup some of those royalties, settling a suit with Disney out of court.¹⁰⁹

Many male isicathamiya choral groups formed in South Africa from the 1930s on, with competitions fueling the energy of the genre. Choir competitions were common in schools, and this was picked up by male workers in hostels in Johannesburg and Durban, who competed against each other. In 1965 **Joseph Shabalala** formed the isicathamiya group **Ladysmith Black Mambazo** (“black axe from Ladysmith”), and they made their first recordings soon after. They became one of the most acclaimed groups within South Africa in the 1970s. In the mid-1980s they recorded on Paul Simon’s *Graceland* album and have since gone on to a major international career. (They will be covered more in Section IV.)

LISTENING EXAMPLE 8:

Solomon Linda’s Original Evening Birds, “Mbube”

This is the original recording from 1939 of “Mbube” (“Lion”), which helped popularize the style. Many may recognize this song as “The Lion Sleeps Tonight,” particularly at the 2:23 mark when one can hear a snippet of the melody that would later be set to the lyrics: “In the jungle, the mighty jungle.” Two features in particular mark the contribution of Solomon Linda’s group: the chord pattern and the distribution of voices in the ensemble. The chord pattern became an enduring standard: G, C, G (with a D in the bass), D, with each chord getting four beats. It can also be diagrammed as I, IV, I 6/4, V. The arrangement of voices in Linda’s group was novel for its time: one person each as soprano, alto, and tenor, and several basses, which gave them a booming sound.¹¹⁰