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Broadcasting for the Congolese

Growing popularity of Bula-Matari's tom-tom

On January 1, 1949, *Radio Congo Belge* at Leopoldville entered a new field of activity, i.e. government sponsored radio broadcasts for the indigenous population of the Belgian Congo. Inaugurating the programme, Governor General Jungers broadcast an appeal to all natives of the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi. « Until now », he said, « you have heard in the silence of the warm, starlit nights the tom-toms of your chiefs. Every night from now on you will have the opportunity to listen to the tom-tom of the Bula-Matari : your radio-set ». Since then three years have passed and African listeners as well as those in charge of beating Bula Matari's tom-tom have learnt many things. There is now a living native radio community in the Belgian Congo, and Station O.T.H. is definitely holding its own in the Congolese air.

During a recent visit to Station O.T.H. we met the chief of this service, Mr. Drum, a former territorial administrator in Katanga, who is well known to readers interested in Belgium's French language colonial literature. While we were there we saw a radio play being produced by a European in cooperation with a number of African editors and announcers. The actors were playing their parts with a spontaneity which has become very rare in white performances on the radio. Mr Drum explained that O.T.H.'s history started in 1942, when units of the Congolese Army waiting to leave for Nigeria were in camp in the neighbourhood of Leopoldville. Every week a special programme was broadcast for them by the private station « Radio Congolia » at Leopoldville. After the Congolese troops had left for Egypt, Radio Congolia continued to broadcast war news for the families of the soldiers. The experiment proved so successful that

by the end of 1944 a group of leading personalities decided to create a fund for broadcasting a daily radio programme for the natives.

As from January 1, 1946, the Government-General granted a subsidy to « Radio Congolia », while measures were under study to enable the colonial administration to take over the producing of radio programmes for the indigenous population of the Belgian Congo and Ruanda-Urundi. « Radio Congolia » did a very good job, but the power of its transmissions was very small and the programmes could be picked up in only a very limited area of the immense colony. This situation was remedied when broadcasting for the natives was taken over by the colonial government.

Since January 1949, daily broadcasts are taking place from 5.30 to 7.30 p.m. (Leopoldville local time) partly in French, and in turn in each one of the four principal native languages, Lingala, Kiswahili, Tshiluba and Kikongo. Once a week the programme is largely filled by the educational service of the Congo Armed Forces. During the Saturday broadcasts the programme leader answers listeners' mail and a preview of the programmes of the following week is given. The Sunday programme brings a religious feature produced by Catholic and Protestant missionaries. However, the programmes are largely presented by African editors and announcers.

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From the very start native women announcers have been employed to convince the indigenous community that women have also a part to play in the social and cultural advancement of the people. The first woman native announcer in Africa, Pauline Lisanga, rapidly became extremely popular with native listeners. Honey coloured Pauline Lisanga still wears a long, bright coloured pagne, the traditional dress of native women in the Congo. When you see her looking through the record files, with a broad smile on her long lips, Pauline gives the impression that she is a very happy person. Is it just the vanity of discovering a completely new world? Who will ever know the secret of the first Congolese woman announcer?

Pauline Lisanga was given a contract by the Government not only as an announcer, but also as a translator and record librarian. At night, when the studios are closed she returns to her hut of dried

mud, in no way different from thousands of others owned by native workers in the Congolese capital. Here she lives with her parents, fishers of the Bapoto tribe. As custom requires in native families with unmarried adult daughters, a smaller hut has been built for her in the yard near that of her parents. Pauline's first gesture when she comes home is to light a candle which is stuck in the ground near her bed. Her pagnes hang around it, and with a simple chair and table, these form all her possessions. The table is littered with personal letters and the texts of songs she has composed. She writes them for herself and for her friends, but she does not like to talk about them. She is not vain about her talent; Pauline in fact is not so simple a character. She tells very little about herself and prefers to talk about her family. One day, after a long period of silence, she suddenly told me in a very direct, familiar way : « You know, I have lots to do tonight. I have to prepare my father's meal ».

» Is your mother away ? »

» She has gone on the river to fetch fish. On Sundays my mother sells fish in the market. We are people of the river; my people are fishers. At home I have to work for I am the only child still living at home. »

» Have you any married sisters ? »

» No. I have had sisters. They are all dead. You see, that's life... They were prettier than I am, and now they are buried. There were seven children at home. Now, I am left alone. »

» But you must have many friends, you talk for the radio, you are on the stage... »

The word « stage » always strikes a spark out of Pauline. She made her *début* as an actress in local circles. It was in plays by Labiche that she became popular with Congolese audiences and that her talent was spotted by a small number of Europeans. To my last question, she replied at once : « I love the theatre ». Then she became silent again. I ventured to ask her why she liked the theatre. But I could get no answer from Pauline. She remained silent, pulling the edges of her pagne. I insisted : « Why do you like to act plays ? Is it because you embody characters ? »

» No »

» Because people applaud you ? »

» No »

» Why then ? »

At last she told me her secret : « Because in plays I can feel myself becoming intelligent. »

If it were not for the long slits of her eyes, her thin nose and her high forehead, Pauline Lisanga would not be different from so many other Congolese women, slowly swinging their hips under lightly knotted pagnes. In spite of her newly gained fame she remains a real Congolese woman. She has the little worries of her race, and also its shortcomings. Sometimes she is late at the studio. Punctuality and discipline are, of course, new notions for her. On some occasions her penchant for the delights of European beer and native palm wine has played tricks on her. But can we really blame her ? For she is far from being without real qualities : she is a complex character, reserved, strong willed and very independent. Above all she is studious and it has enabled her to assimilate so many new things from a strange world. Pauline also has pluck. In 1948, dressed in a dazzling dress made for the occasion, she was the only and first native woman of the Congo who, together with a group of *évolués*, flew in an aeroplane over the Congolese capital. A newsreel reporter was in the aircraft to record the event. Unfortunately, Pauline felt less comfortable in the clouds than she does behind her microphone. She was very sick indeed, but when the cameraman turned his lens on her she made a supreme effort to save the face of black women. Pauline's brave smile was recorded by the camera and on a thousand screens throughout the world it bore witness to the advancement of the Congo's native women.

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The radio is a powerful instrument toward the general advancement of the native population as a whole. For besides European and native music, the programmes consist of news, principally Congolese and Belgian news, educational talks, dialogues and features on the most diverse subjects. These include hygiene, child care and public health, the natural regions of the Congo and the principal cities of Belgium, the administrative, judicial, social and economic institutions of the country. Talks are devoted to the importance of saving and cooperative organisations, *savoir-vivre* and morality, books, news and native arts and crafts. They point out the obsolescence of

certain native customs and beliefs, they treat important colonial problems such as the question of taxes, the struggle against polygamy, the encouragement of monogamic weddings, etc. Feature programmes treat of the Congolese fauna and flora, of tales and legends from native folklore. There are quiz programmes in which listeners are invited to compare our proverbs with their own sayings and to draw the moral parallel between them. Every week faulty French phrases are dictated as a puzzle which advanced natives are asked to correct. Everything is done to make the broadcasts as lively as possible, while maintaining them on the level of native audiences. The growing listeners's mail is one indication of the success of radio in the Congo. Three to four hundred letters a week are received from every part of the Colony and even from the neighbouring countries. Many of the letters, of course, are simple requests for records, but many African listeners ask for information of every description. Many send in results to the contests and quiz programmes and even short stories, some of which are rewritten and broadcast. Many letters contain news and notices which are included in the news bulletins. In this way the Congolese radio has a great number of benevolent correspondents spread over the whole territory of the colony. The natives are not alone to give their impressions. Many whites tune in to the programmes, territorial administrators, missionaries and settlers who want to make sure that their native personnel or pupils hear the programme most suited for them.

When groups of natives from distant regions of the Congo happen to be in Leopoldville, recordings are made of their folk music. This music is then rebroadcast in the programmes intended for the region in question. In this way the Congolese radio is building up a valuable collection of typical negro music.

The programmes are broadcast on the 32.57 m wavelength (9210 kilocycles) and can be picked up by ordinary sets. But so far only a small number of natives own private receiving sets, especially in the interior of the country. Several firms have now started to build inexpensive sets with dry batteries. Many letters from native teachers or agricultural and medical assistants in the interior describe how the programmes received on their private sets are enjoyed by natives whom they invite at night for a listening session on the porch or the « barza ». By far the largest number of natives, however, hear the programmes over public address systems. Seventeen camps of

the Congo Army and twenty two large centres throughout the Belgian Congo have been equipped in this way. About twenty new installations for public radio listening, will start to function during 1952.

Of the new Congo's many modern scenes, none is more impressive than the spectacle of hundreds of African men, women and children crowding together under the loudspeaker when the first bars of « Uele », the call tune known throughout the colony, resounds in the hot tropical night. In silence they listen to the voice transmitted from afar, and sometimes at the first notes of a Congolese tune their feet move restlessly in the old Congo dancing rythms. But the radio is more than a modern tom-tom. In most Congolese communities where there are study groups of advanced natives, meeting halls have been equipped by the administration with a receiver. This year another twenty halls will receive radios. Since January 1, 1952 the radio tax has been reduced to 48 francs, or less than a dollar a year. Formerly it was 240 francs, and no doubt the lower tax will induce a far greater number of natives to buy a private set.

Under the Ten Year Plan regional transmitters will be built in every chief city of the provinces to relay the programmes from Leopoldville, as well as to broadcast programmes of a more regional character, eventually in different local dialects. In a country like the Belgian Congo with more than 2000 dialects, this regional system of broadcasting appears to be the only one likely to reach the majority of listeners. In this way broadcasting will become a powerful medium of popular education and information in the Belgian Colony.



Pauline Lisanga, the first African woman announcer, reading the news in the Radio Congo Belge studio at Leopoldville.