
THE USE OF AFRICAN MUSIC IN THE CHURCH

by

DR. JOHAN K. LOUW

After my short experience of work amongst African people in Nyasaland—because I admit that 14 years is not a very long period—I am becoming more and more convinced that the foreignness of the music we use in worship is a very important contributory factor in making the Christian religion to be something Western in the mind of many an African. There is, as far as I can judge, a translation of the Bible in the Nyanja language, which is, in many ways, a very admirable translation. So much of the life of the people we meet in the Bible is more like that of the people of the Country of the Lake than like that of modern Westerners that the Bible speaks to the Nyanja reader and makes its own appeal to his mind and heart. Some attempts have been made recently to bring our forms of worship closer to the life of the people, though much more may need to be done. But in this most important field of music very nearly nothing has been done with regard to the hymnbook used at present.

There is no doubt that with the years many hymns have come to have real meaning to African Christians who associate them with genuine spiritual experience, but that the hymnbook has retained its foreignness to the majority of the population there is no doubt at all. I am prepared to maintain this in spite of the fact that a cross examination of a representative number of church members may not reveal the truth of this statement. The hymnbook with its foreignness has come to be regarded as an essential part of the Christian religion, and it is considered that it must be so. The fact that it is foreign does not seem to be anything wrong. Many a hymn may carry scarcely any meaning, "But", says a catechumen, when questioned as to the meaning of a certain hymn, "I never understood that these hymns were supposed to have any meaning!" However, many of the translations are intelligible, and it is quite true that they have been a help to most Christians.

The words then, often have real meaning to people, but the music gives everything that taste of foreignness which has come to be regarded as part of church music, and which, because it is not felt and because it distorts the meaning of the words as soon as they are sung, must form a barrier which makes Jesus to be the partly Europeanised Saviour, instead of the Christ sent by God directly to the Nyanja people just as much to any other people.

A girl who grew up near a town in Nyasaland and went to a girls' boarding school at an early age, and has as much chance as anyone to get to know European religious music as presented to the African by many missions in her country, when in the later stage of her secondary school education, once remarked, "We do not feel these things when we sing them, but we feel our own African songs."

There are those who believe that there is scarcely anything in African music that is worth preserving. Anyone, however, who has had the painful experience of having to sit through a singing lesson in a Nyasaland village school, and then immediately afterwards heard these screaming youngsters turn into children singing beautifully and with feeling when it comes to the responsive songs of their *mbano*, cannot doubt any longer that in Nyasaland at least, there is some very beautiful music alive. There is no question as to the wealth of musical art upon which we can draw, but it may be asked whether it is possible to use this music in worship. Before I offer some suggestions with reference to this question, it may well be asked whether it is not too late to make any amends now. I do not believe that it is too late, because the very large majority of African children in Nyasaland still grow up in a background where real African music, using an

African scale or scales, forms the background to their musical education, and whatever is European, even though it may come very early in the life of the child, is still foreign. It is, therefore, not only not too late to start, but it is still essential that a start should be made, and that as soon as possible.

As to what can be done, I am here mentioning only a few points, but I think they are fundamental. The first is that the true musician should be found. And surely, there must be amongst African Christians some who are musicians, even though they may not be the very best ones. My second point is, then, that *Christian* musicians need to be discovered. And in the third place, however difficult this may prove to be, the Christian musician must be convinced that, just as other musicians sing out of their hearts, using real Nyanja poetry and real Nyanja tone patterns, when they dance or mourn or praise a chief or hero, so the Christian should do the same when he wishes to praise God spontaneously, or to come to Him in time of distress, or express any other normal religious experience in song. *When one true African Christian musician is brought to disregard any form of church music that he may have known in the past and breaks forth praising God in the musical medium that lies closest to his heart, half the battle will have been won. This is not impossible.*
