

AFRICAN MUSIC IN CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

by

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In "African Music", volume 1, No. 3, I wrote, "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." I maintained that very much of what was found in the Nyanja hymnbook I was familiar with was completely foreign to the African Christians who were using the book, and that it was not only not too late to start using African Music through the instrumentality of African musicians, but that it was "essential that a start should be made, and that as soon as possible."

Can it be done? This, after all, is the crux of the matter, and unless it is possible to get down to some practical scheme in which Africans will play their part and African artists themselves satisfy the need, it is little use discussing the matter. I believe it is possible to get down to such a scheme provided the necessary staff and financial assistance for an African Music Centre, could be found. How such a Centre should be run is a matter for further investigation and experimentation. There are, however, some practical suggestions I should like to make, which, I think, can lead to very useful results.

Fairly lengthy discussions with a standard VII class as to the value to a particular people of its own specific culture—its language, music, material culture, etc.—led to the conclusion that a people's music was part of its own soul, and that if a people lost its own music it would be rather like the body of a person who had lost a limb. It was clear that all the old unwritten literature and music of a tribe had not been forced upon it from outside, but had been the product of the combined efforts of artists of generations past, and that it was most unlikely that to-day there should not be people living who could produce art at least as good as that of the artists of the past. When we came to the discussion of the place of African music in Christian Worship, the class was unanimous that this music had to be something new since all music of the past had its own associations and meaning and could not just be transferred into a new experience. The Christian with a new experience was also the man who had to give expression to his new experience in the musical language of his own soul. People who have the musical ability their forefathers had must be alive to-day, and this conviction led to an enthusiastic, "Tikhozal" (We can!) from the class.

"We can!" is the secret of the present effort. The first part of it is the collection of existing music. Any African boy necessarily has but a limited knowledge of the music of his own tribe. He hears only that of his own little area, and the more music individual members of the class can collect and teach their fellows (during meetings of the African Music Society in the School) the better. But the next step is attempting to produce original music. The following ideas have been expressed and have influenced the minds of the pupils in their efforts to produce their own music.

1. Very much of the best music in Nyanja is found in the responsive songs in *ntbano*. But there are many such stories that do not contain any songs but that could very suitably accommodate such songs. "Tikhoza kupeka tokhal" (We can compose ourselves!).
2. Many Bible stories could just as easily accommodate good songs using the words said by Bible characters, e.g. Abraham's conversation with Isaac on their way to Moriah (Gen. 22:7,8); Delilah's warning to Samson (Judges 16:9); passages from the story of Joseph; and scores of others.

3. Many verses from the Psalms and many other passages in the Bible could be set to music just as they are without any attempt at arranging them after the pattern of the rhythms used in the present hymnbook.

The class mentioned above has been back to school for about six weeks now. There have been some first results such as the following:

1. One boy brought back a lament sung for a deceased sister. He did not compose any song, but he produced a story of a girl, the twin of the one who had died, and how she sings the lament, is unable to live without her sister, and follows her to her grave. Here the effort was a suitable story for a traditional song.
2. The cock and the wild cat made friends. Wild Cat visits Cock, who, having hidden his head under his wing, appears to be dead. He wakes up at noon his head suddenly back in its right place. Some time later Cock visits Wild Cat. Wild Cat tells his wife how Cock was without his head when he last visited him and asks her to cut off his head. At noon he will wake up and his head will be back in its right place. Wild Cat's wife does as she is told. When Cock arrives she tells him that Wild Cat is asleep but will wake up at noon. Cock discovers what has happened, and Wild Cat's wife blames him for the death of her husband. Ever since, Wild Cat's family have been the sworn enemies of Cock's family.

As a sort of combined effort the following song was composed in class to fit into this fable. It is sung by Cock's wife when Wild Cat appears, and again by Wild Cat's wife when Cock appears. The song was a success and popular with the whole class.

"Aphiri agona, aphiri agona.
Auka akacira, auka pamsana."
*Mr. Phiri is asleep, Mr. Phiri is asleep.
He will wake up when he is well, he will wake up at noon.*

3. Two boys appeared with the song: "Mulungu wathu wabwino,"
(Our good God.)

The song was fairly long and all the words were taken from the Bible, mostly from Psalms. It had a pleasing tune which caught on immediately, but its chief importance was the fact that it was at once rejected by the class since the music was judged to be European. This showed that the class had got the idea.

4. Cock and Lizard are friends. Cock complains about his unhappy lot in that when his owner needs meat he will undoubtedly be killed. His owner receives visitors, a child is sent to catch Cock, who, as he runs for his life, passes under the tree in which Lizard goes higher and higher up every time he sees Cock passing. Cock sings the song, which is the collector's own composition to fit into this story.

"Agulo nawo:
Wakwera mtengo, wakwera mtengo, wakwera.
Abwenzi afika:
Wakwera mtengo, wakwera mtengo, wakwera.
Andilanditse:
Wakwera mtengo, wakwera mtengo, wakwera."
*And the Lizard:
He has gone up the tree, he has gone up the tree, he has gone up.
Friends have arrived:
He has gone up the tree, he has gone up the tree, he has gone up.
Let him save me:
He has gone up the tree, he has gone up the tree, he has gone up.*

But the Lizard only goes further and further up.

This song was probably better than the first one (under No. 2 above).

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5. Here again the same boy who had made a story for the song under No. 1 above, appeared with an interesting story for a traditional song, "Kunkhuni nkalere mwana" (Let me look after the child when I go to collect firewood).
 6. This was a fable containing probably the best song so far produced.

It was about a lemur that had been killed, and one of its legs had been cut off. However, whenever the two boys who had killed it appeared in public, the lemur came to life again in the form of a one-legged little man and danced and sang a very lively song.

Both the story and the song are the work of one of the members of the class.

It is certainly significant that of the songs mentioned above the only religious one was a hybrid at best, but it was very encouraging that it was immediately rejected and the attitude of the class, still, was, "Tikhoza!") We can!).

It may seem that we have been able to report very meagre results. It has, however, merely been a beginning. Only part of a few Nyanja language periods has been spent on the task, and the determination of the class to produce something worthwhile, and the actual pleasure their efforts have given them are surely the most important results.

Tikhoza!