

## THE FUTURE OF MUSIC IN BASUTOLAND

by

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There is a popular impression among the general public that folk music is a thing of the past and of no modern importance. This no doubt arises from a misconception of the function of music in society and also from the notion that the practice of European folk musics is a revivalist art, and, therefore, African music must fall into the same category. This is far from the truth which, in this case, is hidden under a mass of false assumptions and prejudices.

There are two good reasons, the one cultural and the other social, why the authentic country music of Basutoland, like other African musics elsewhere, should be studied carefully and enlisted into the ranks of modern community services. Before discussing this we must comprehend the motives of those persons, black and white alike, who see in the destruction of a local musical form a sense of 'progress'.

The motive behind the direct attack upon African musics on the part of the whites, most of whom were either missionaries, teachers or sellers of gramophone records, was often simple. With the missionaries it was the ardent desire to protect their converts from all heathen associations; with the teachers it was the generally accepted convention of teaching music in schools and the fact that the only textbooks available were of European music with which they themselves were familiar and, moreover, this course fitted in with the hymn singing ambitions of their reverend colleagues; and with the sellers of gramophone records it was the higher sales value of popular dance music and erotic songs which commanded their capital and their advertising propaganda. Naturally, the African student was open to all three forms of assault upon the integrities of his own music, which, being altogether oral, unsupported by an analytical or written treatise or depth of articulate philosophy, was ignored or banished from its normal place in the activities of his section of African society.

For literate Africans the motive behind the change from indigenous to foreign types of music was more subtle. A characteristic of so many African peoples is their tendency to associate themselves with the stronger force whatever it may be . . . with the stronger army, the more forceful preacher, the richer community, the more successful bandit, regardless of the ethical situation. It is the common inclination of weaker communities to attach themselves in this way, to 'climb on the band wagon', and to associate themselves consciously or unconsciously with those they fear or admire. In the apparently small matter of accepting a new musical convention offered them by the church, the school and the market, those in closest contact with whites understandably chose the line of least resistance and the path of white approval. It was the magic which would help lead them to the idyllic life, a life of ease within a new form of smart society divorced from their fellows in agriculture and manual labour; but at what cost no one seemed to realise.

Take the effect upon African verse, for example. All Bantu languages are so-called tone languages in which the meaning of single words or phrases may be changed by the alteration of the tone values attached to each syllable. It is, therefore, of first importance when setting African words to music that the tone melody of the whole sentence shall be correct if a song is to convey the true meaning. This leads naturally to the inevitable rule that the melody of an African song shall be fluid—not fixed—and shall rise and fall with the meaning of the words. The melodic line in this case is not unalterable as it is with most European songs but flexible and controlled by the requirements of semantic tone.

What, in fact, has happened in our schools is that the white arrangers of Sotho and other Bantu translations to be sung to familiar European hymn tunes have conveniently ignored the tone and stress patterns of the vernacular in order to maintain the flow of the well known melody, or of one they have composed in the old familiar style. Professor E. G. Parrinder, of the Ibadan University, maintains that there is not a single hymnbook published in an African vernacular which does not make nonsense of the words.\*

We have, in fact, assiduously taught Africans to sing the sacred gibberish for so long that even the most educated of them have accepted this nonsensical convention which makes a fool of anyone who has any pretensions of being musically sensitive. Not for a moment would a Sotho accept the recitation of one of his beloved *Litboko* praises in such a travesty of mispronunciation both in stress and tone, and yet the magic of the foreign style of religious music propagated by musically and linguistically insensitive persons has mesmerised them into mutilating the shape and form of their mother tongue. From religious music the distortion has spread to most of the urban secular songs also, which are considered to be socially smart and acceptable. The tragedy lies not only in the naïvety which continues to characterise most of the music of the schools, missions and towns but in the deeper effects upon African character which it has produced.

For example, a well known Sotho composer of secular songs stated that if he were to compose melodies which did not distort the tone values and therefore the meaning of his Sotho words his friends would call his compositions 'heathen'. The despised heathen may sing Sotho correctly, the superior Christian may not! Is there any civilisation which would tolerate such childishness or impose similar conditions upon its poets and musicians? The plain fact is that, musically speaking, the educated African is less cultured and less sensitive than his illiterate relatives whom he professes to look down upon.

Matters become even worse when one considers the complexities of harmony in addition to the melodic line. The insidious flavour of the three common chords, tonic, dominant and sub-dominant, which permeates African school songs almost without exception has infected the proper harmonic ability of normal African singers to such an extent that most of their performances are reduced to the simplest of chordal progressions and a general level of mediocrity which no African folk music possesses. The whites give valuable prizes to those choirs which achieve an infatuation for singing in this familiar manner, a musical contagion which Percy Scholes, the famous author of the 'Oxford Companion to Music' has described as the greatest destroyer of true music the world over.

It would be difficult to understand how intelligent persons of both races could have allowed themselves to contribute to so mawkish a product, if one did not remember the height of their motives, and the depth of their prejudices. Neither, however, justifies a continuation of this style of performance as the recognised music of the educational institutions, unless the future of Sotho culture in common with all Bantu cultures is not considered of any great consequence. For instance, if the vernacular is to be treasured as a local cultural asset, it would indeed appear paradoxical to insist upon correctness of grammar on paper and to ignore the significance of stress and tone in song.

The social reason for studying and encouraging the natural music of the country is, perhaps, of greater practical importance. It will no doubt take many generations to heighten the aesthetic sensitivity and cultural ability of the average Sotho person beyond their present level, which by all accounts is not behind that of similar communities in

\* African Music, Vol. I, No. 3, Music in West African Churches, pp. 37-38, E. G. Parrinder.

southern Africa. On the other hand, the recognition of Sotho folk music as an accepted musical form may well have a most immediate and stimulating effect upon their social lives both in and outside the Territory.

To explain why this should be so will again require a certain digression into the theory of social motivation.

It is generally held that the more simple a community the stronger the social sanctions must be to maintain an integrated body of people with mutually acceptable ideals and conventions. Furthermore, the motive force which keeps a community in effective operation will change for each person as he or she becomes more aware of his responsibility toward society in general, tempering his habits and ambitions as an individual for the common good.

There is a kind of polarity in this range of social motives from sheer compulsion at the negative end to complete social integrity which requires no compulsion at the positive end of the scale. It is the compass between compulsion by force and propulsion by ideal which society imposes upon every one of its members, each according to the degree of his awareness of duty to the community. Reisman, in his book, "Individualism Reconsidered",\* recently quoted by Dr. S. Biesheuvel in his 1959 Hoernlé Memorial Lecture, briefly distinguishes between the degree of compulsive force and the idealistic attraction as the difference between a sense of shame and a sense of guilt, the former being imposed externally upon the individual by his fellows and the latter being evoked internally by the citizen himself. The more a person becomes aware of himself and his duty, the less he requires a sense of shame and the more he will acquire a sense of guilt to make him aware of what is anti-social. In theory, the perfect citizen would control his social behaviour solely by a fine instinct for the welfare of his community. The less perfect would still require a certain feeling of guilt to prevent his erring, while the common man would need to be shamed into conforming to his group's normal standards of behaviour. Some such explanation would appear to be appropriate for the better understanding of the pattern of social motivation of African communities.

This is where the daily use of African folk music comes vividly into the picture. Our experience from recording several thousand African songs between the Cape and the Sudan, shows clearly that the social function of each local music is not only to amuse, to please or praise local performers and audiences and to maintain group loyalties, but also to shame those who have transgressed or who might be tempted into transgression against the conventions of their own people. The effect of raising public opinion in this manner can be most salutary as African singers do not mince words in expressing their disapproval of the behaviour of an anti-social person. The force of the scathing remark, often couched in broad local idiom, may well escape the uninitiated but is clearly understood by the object of their scorn. It may well be that local folk music in this light is one of Africa's most important social assets. It is not suggested that the music of one tribe would be effective outside its own borders or even beyond the limits of its own district. The element of social service which their folk music contains is to be found in the continuity of music-making in a manner familiar to all concerned, well appreciated and easily shared by all the villagers, for whom and by whom it is made.

Music and songs which have their origin outside the indigenous community are not likely to have so beneficial an effect upon local society. Foreign lyrics adopted by Africans do not often refer to local persons or circumstances, their style in most cases reflects extraneous musical influences picked up casually in far off towns or in institutions, and their demands upon rural talent may outstrip the abilities of the common people or require set performances such as those which are demanded from school children and formal choirs. In other words, urban and foreign styles of song, whether they be religious or secular, are unlikely to be able to replace the local folk-music as a social corrective however well intentioned they may be.

\* Doubleday Anchor Books A58, 1954.

Semi-educated persons who have avoided the strictures of an active folk music do not readily advocate its perpetuation if they themselves have not achieved an adequate sense of proportion and relatively high degree of social conscience with the necessary sense of guilt to make them reliable citizens. The distressingly large number of educated Africans who fall between these two motive forces, losing their sense of shame before they acquire an adequate sense of guilt, may well account for the extent of the notorious anti-social element which is all too prevalent in our industrial townships.

Recognition by all appropriate authorities of the social and cultural worth of an active and articulate folk music, well appreciated in its linguistic finesse and distinctive musical structure, might provide the missing link between the teaching of good citizenship and its practice for those African peoples of the present day and immediate future who are more influenced by what they hear than by what they read. This, it would appear, means the bulk of the Sotho people of this generation. It does not mean, however, that all evolved Africans should sing exclusively country songs, but that they should be capable of an intelligent and unemotional assessment of Sotho and other African folk musics, particularly from the social and poetic points of view.

There are, of course, complications in the multi-racial African scene, where loyalties can be divided by race. The escape from Sotho rural society into a community of African bourgeoisie is not necessarily a step from the 'shame' motivation into one of 'guilt' motivation. The individuals concerned may attempt to dissociate themselves from their background and create a new class or society of their own. While striving for white recognition on the one hand they are often still more anxious to be accepted as emancipated persons among their white collar contemporaries. As this middle class society with dreams of power and prestige far beyond their intrinsic abilities is constantly taken at its actual economic value by white employers and politicians and not at its own valuation, great stresses are engendered through a feeling of persecution and lack of recognition, leading to active political revolt as a short cut to an otherwise impossible goal.

It is most understandable therefore that the evidence proffered by a white collar African concerning the merits of any aspect of African art practised by his own country folk will be subject to severe prejudice. His schooling and religious teaching have made him constantly aware of the 'inferiority' of the social habits of his 'unenlightened' relatives and he cannot afford to advocate the continued practice of African folk music, for example, if by so doing it were to associate him in the eyes of his fellow bourgeoisie with those whom he has been constrained to treat as social and intellectual inferiors, heathen and manual labourers.

In our work at the Library we are constantly confronted with the deliberate distortion by members of this African middle class of the facts concerning the composition and practice of authentic African music. Europeans in charge of African administration and welfare work, such as Compound Managers and teachers, are often misled by the advice of such men and women, being unaware of the social pressures under which they exist, especially so if the advice proffered happens to fit in with the European's own predilections. For example, on every occasion when we have relayed recordings of genuine Sotho music to a Sotho audience there has been general and delighted response, and a request for more recordings of 'home' music. However, Sotho clerks in positions of responsibility, such as those in broadcasting, municipal employment and on the mines, normally deny that there is any enthusiasm among the people for their own Sotho forms of music and are likely to recommend to their employers the acquisition of any other music associated in the back of their minds with 'uplift' or social advancement, but not with their own 'heathen' or 'primitive' past . . . in other words any familiar music of American Negro or European origin, jazz

or the 'Messiah'. Their intellectual resources are so slender that they are anxious not to be associated in any way with those people or situations which would 'drive them back', a frame of mind heartily encouraged by their teachers but, nonetheless, not conducive to greater maturity of character. The rarity with which one finds Africans who have overcome this form of inhibition is an indication of the severity of the social strain they undergo. Maturity is more commonly found in the pre-literate rural 'heathen' on the one hand and the small but select group of the highly educated on the other, rather than in the steadily increasing problem group in the middle classes which is still subject to the contagion of magic . . . a desire for effect without the tedium of an understood cause.

What can one suggest to break the steady decline of original music making in so evolved a community as the Sotho? It is clear that there must be a certain vested interest in the continuation of the present imitative trends, in the established curriculum, in the sale of printed books, in the demands of 'high life' society or in the plain inertia which cries "too late".

Firstly there must be a real knowledge of the nature and potential resources of Sotho music, both structurally in the logic of its many forms, and in its social function.

Secondly, there must be a willingness to learn from the natural poets of the community, whether they be literate or not, without the intrusion of class snobbery, coupled with a revolt against the continued distortion of the tone and stress of the Sotho language in all songs religious or secular. After all, as Rowland Hill remarked, there is "no reason why the devil should have all the good tunes".

Thirdly, there must be found a small group of sensitive and active persons who are prepared and equipped to undertake the necessary work, and hand on what they find to others who are willing to make good use of it.

A little less preoccupation with exercises in imitation of foreign arts and a little more with the integrity of Sotho intangibles may yet make of them a truly cultured African people with a soul they can call Sotho, and with poetry, prose, music and drama which will stir their hearts and reflect their distinctive attitude to life.

If our present methods of education, religious instruction and administration coupled with their imitative proclivities tend to make them less Sotho and more commonplace than before, then clearly the system should be changed if the innate spiritual values of the country are to keep pace with their material progress.

The whites may initiate the work; it is only the Sotho themselves who can perfect it, if they are truly patriotic.

**Dr. Agnes Winifred Hoernlé.**

It is with a deep sense of loss that the Society heard of the death of one of its Founders, Dr. Agnes Winifred Hoernlé, on March 17th. 1960.

An appreciation of her life and work will appear in the next edition of the Journal.