

## THE MUSIC OF MY PEOPLE

(An introduction to music in Barotseland)

by

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It has been said that Africans in the main are a musical people. This is a fact that needs not much effort to search for proofs since open appreciable evidence surrounds each and every African village worthy of the name. It is the thudding of the drums that warns strangers as well as visitors approaching an African village as to whether people in the particular village are sad or happy. This is much so where the Lozi people are concerned.

Music in Barotseland (the country covering most of the Zambezi Valley northwest of the Victoria Falls) penetrates and indeed completes most of our daily activities. Girls sing as they dig, pound and, above all, as they go on their several errands fetching wood, water and others. Village men, on returning from the fields, usually gather under a big tree listening to one of them playing piece after piece of music on one of our several musical instruments, while the rest work at the various crafts. The tunes on "*Kang'ombyo*" or "*Kalimba*" punctuate the continuous low conversational tones of the old men as they talk over many state affairs or matters of general interest.

There is music for enjoyment, when people drink and dance. Young people dance "*Sipelu*" in the evenings while everyone in a village joins in when there is a major tribal dance such as the "*Lilombola*" or "*Siyemboka*" dance. The dances differ very greatly in step and rhythm as much as their songs differ. There are very few men who know how to beat the drums according to the style of all the dances we have. Most of us know only one or two.

We have music for all our tribal ceremonies such as "*Kuomboka*"—the moving of the valley people to the higher places when the valley is flooded, and "*Mayobo*" which is the ceremony at which a person is chosen to take up the name as well as the duties and right of his or her dead relative. Above all, we have "*Bwalyanjo*" whereby girls are initiated. For all of these and others, we hold great festivals marked by great dances and music. Dance and beer seem to be the deciding factors as to the success of the celebration. These two things cannot be divorced from music, instrumental or otherwise, just as much as rain and water cannot be separated.

Girls' initiation takes about a month or two. During this period girls are instructed in how to go about their daily work as wives and mothers. Here again music in the form of songs takes a great part. There is a lot of singing and very little talking, if any, at the "all women dances" at which girls are instructed. I say "all women dances" because they are exclusively for women; small girls, also, may not be allowed to attend. Songs used at such instructional dances are very meaningful and they cover almost every aspect of the life in a good home.

Of all Barotse music, I think the most fascinating is the type of music I shall refer to as "Healing Music". This is nothing but the songs used by African "doctors" when healing their clients. A "*Ng'aka*", as we call him, is a very respectable person in our society, just as much as medical doctors are in a modern society. These are the main itinerant, crossing the country in different directions every time hunting for the sick and the worried, at the same time trying to get as many patients as each possibly can.

Most of these "doctors" heal by holding a special dance throughout the night. None but the "doctor" dances in most cases. Occasionally, however, the patient may dance if that is the form of the healing. Treatment is given while the doctor dances to his own songs. The songs are thrilling and sometimes awful as they may talk about

supernatural happenings. The dances and songs are so varied that no one is able to know what the "Ng'aka" will sing if he has never seen him dance before.

There are many so-called diseases, most of which I believe are psychological, which can be healed through dance. Each of these "diseases" has its own song, its own dance style and indeed its own theme and process of healing. It may interest you to know a few of such diseases that occurred and also vanished during my lifetime.

(a) "*Sisongo*". This "disease" affects legs and arms. The victim suffers from pains in the bones just like one feels when suffering from rheumatism. He at times has spasmodic involuntary movements of the leg muscles or arm muscles. How does music work in the case? The doctor treats while singing and the only confirmation of the diagnosed disease comes when the patient's limbs involuntarily move in sympathy with the music, both vocal and instrumental.

(b) "*Liyala*" and "*Maimbwe*". These, I think, were among the most popular "diseases". Unlike "*Sisongo*" which has its origin in Baluvale, these are believed to have originated in our country. A patient suffers general malady and responds to the rhythm of the music at the time he is put on a steaming pot of medicine under a blanket.

(c) "*Mumba*" is yet another interesting disease. This is believed to have come from the Batonga of the Southern Province of Northern Rhodesia. The nature of the "disease" is simple. It may start with general indisposition with multiple dreams at night, mainly concerning wild animals. The victim may or may not be in bed, but nevertheless he needs attention from experts as some of such cases have been known to develop into a complex and delicate mental disturbance whereby an adult goes about without clothes. Among other things, the patient runs into the forest or climbs up trees during the dance. If such happens, it is believed he will only return to the dance on hearing "his or her special song", i.e. the song that appeals to him most.

You may like to know more about this running away from the dance. This "disease" is believed to concern a wild animal called "*Mumba*" which has one hand, one eye, one ear, one leg and half the body and head, such that all the right side of its body has disappeared. It stands on one foot like a person. It lives in the jungle and cannot be seen. If you see one you definitely will suffer from the disease. Rumours have it that people who do meet it fight with it; and that on defeating it, it gives them all the valuable medicine for healing the "disease". As such, most of the songs are about animals and wild life.

(d) "*Moya*" which differs from those I have dealt with in nature and effect, was the most common "disease" during the period from 1930 to 1945. Unlike others it had no appreciable symptoms as the victims in nearly all cases were literally safe and sound. However, the "doctors" claimed that they could diagnose the illness and tell which person had it in early stages. They furthermore alleged that if the so-called patients did not have proper expert attention, they would grow weaker and weaker as days went by until they were so weak that a minor ailment could easily kill them. The fear of such a thing happening, coupled with the great amusement derived from hearing singing at such "congregations" makes girls and women in general flock responsively to the "doctors".

On agreeing, an evening is fixed for the "doctor" to come and heal. People in the village as well as their neighbours meet in a courtyard round a fire. Songs that have power to heal are sung continuously. There is virtually no medicine used to heal the person concerned.

The treatment session consists of singing and praying, and the victim as well as any others who are among the congregation fall unconscious one by one according to the songs that appeal to them. When one has fallen unconscious, a stroke or two on the back and on the chest using a Testament will bring her to.

The theme and activity at such meetings are superficially similar to those of a Christian church and casual observers can hardly appreciate the difference between them. The meaningful songs used for healing talk about life after death, as well as praising God and heavenly bodies such as stars. Two titles of such songs that spring to mind are: 1) "*Kanya ya Mulena*"—The Lord's Glory, and 2) "*Tente ye zwa kwaKomya*"—a Tent sent to me from Heaven.

These are but some of the "diseases" that came and vanished during my lifetime in which music formed the core and essence of all activities. Life without music would be miserable.