AFRICAN METRICAL LYRICS

by

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The area of Africa with which we are here concerned is the whole of the continent south of the Sahara. The focus of our study is upon the traditional indigenous practice of black Africa, and we shall not therefore consider lyrical patterns which are clearly due to Islamic, European or other outside influence.

A lyric, says the dictionary, is a poem which is "meant to be sung". While in parts of Africa there occurs declamatory or eulogistic verse which is spoken or cantillated in a quasi-singing manner, a very great deal — perhaps the majority of African verse — is lyrical, that is, it is inseparably wedded to a particular tune and only exists as a song in the composer's mind, the words and the tune being generated simultaneously as a single indivisible unit.

To a Westerner, the conception of poetry, lyrical or otherwise, is intimately linked with the notion of metre. Our historical background furnishes two methods of regulating the flow of words in such a way that an ordered rhythmic pattern ensues. There was first the classical Greek and Roman quantitative scansion with its disciplined system of long and short syllables. This began to give way slightly before the Christian era to the system of accentual scansion, where order is imparted to the text by regularly recurring stresses or pulses: and it is this accentual system which has held sway with us till modern times. A common feature of both systems is the division of the text into lines each containing a defined number of feet.

Thus the term "metrical lyric" conveys to us in the West the twofold notion of a text arranged in lines each containing a regularly recurring accent, so making a rhythmic pattern, while the number of pulses in each line is organized to produce another rhythmic pattern superimposed on the former: and this larger-scale rhythm is clearly discernible whether all the lines have the same number of pulses or are arranged in some scheme consisting of lines whose numbers of stresses vary. The essence of the metrical lyric is, indeed, mathematical: each line must have an aesthetically satisfying number of feet, while the various numbers of feet in successive lines must again bear a rhythmically satisfying relation to each other and to the verse itself considered as a single unit. Further, the technique of rhyming serves to emphasize the overall rhythmic scheme.

With such a conception of a lyric in mind, to anyone familiar with the free-flowing sound of African songs, the suggestion that the texts of these songs are metrical may seem more than surprising. Take, for instance, this Hunters' Song of the Ila tribe in Northern Rhodesia:

Kumbo ku cibwe nkutwafumine,
mumhwa mubbobbo waanduka bwalila buta bwa banyama.
Muzuni puuka twiinde,
mwasekelela basibinda bafwa buleembela ku banyama cabula bwiindo.

Where is the scansion? Where is the metre? The only obvious point is that the verse consists of a short first and third line and a long second and fourth, though even this is deceptive, for the lines contain apparently irrational numbers of syllables, namely 10, 18, 9, and 26. One could quote dozens of such apparently unmetrical texts — in fact it is difficult to find a text which is clearly metrical except, perhaps, in some simple children's songs and occasionally in short lullabies: in the latter case, however, the European if acting on his own judgment is almost certain to mark the scansion in the wrong places.

An important yet common-sense deduction should dispose of any idea of irrationality in the rhythm of the texts. A very great number of African lyrics are associated with rhythmic activities such as pounding grain, paddling a canoe, and especially dancing, with its accompanying drumming. Now it must be evident that any text which is associated with a regularly recurring rhythmic pulse is likely to be capable of being analysed in terms of that pulse, unless it is sung entirely at random during such rhythmic activity, which anyone listening to African singing can hear is not true. Further, in dancing, the drums have definite patterns to play, the main pattern being in the hands of the master drummer. Now this man has to keep a sharp ear on the song: there are only certain syllables in any song on which he may start a given pattern. But he can go on playing his pattern indefinitely, and this pattern is countered by a simple repetitive metrical rhythm on the small drum. It follows, therefore, that any song which can be sung during dancing must, *ipso facto*, be metrical. If it were not, chaos would ensue in the orchestra.

Our difficulty in approaching African lyrics is born of our own history. We tend to look either for a quantitative or for an accentual scheme in any text which we could call metrical. But we must ask ourselves whether it is not possible for another quite different metrical basis to exist. In fact, this is exactly the case with African lyrics and it is, we suggest, the strangeness of this basis which has prevented us from recognizing the metre inherent in these songs. In Africa, as we have said, the tune and the text are inseparable. Does the tune give us the key to our problem? In all melodies African or otherwise, the way the melody moves demands its own rhythmic stresses. For instance, a Western tune in common time (four beats in a bar) is so built that it clamours for an accent on every fourth beat. African tunes are not like that: they appear to be in free rhythm, the rise and fall of the melody demanding an accent at irregularly spaced intervals. Though in other respects dissimilar, in this one feature they resemble ecclesiastical plainsong, where again the tune provides its own inherent accentuations. So the African tune considered from its intrinsic melodic structure does not show where any regular metre lies. Yet if an African song is accurately transcribed, the total number of basic units of time it occupies will be found to be mathematically consistent — it will contain a multiple of two units or of three units. So there must be a metrical basis somewhere.

All African songs which can be sung to a regularly recurring rhythmic pulse can also be accompanied by hand-clapping: and it is the hand-clapping which is the basis both of their melodic and of their textual content. The outstanding characteristic of this clapping is that it has nothing whatever to do with stress. Neither the notes nor the syllables on which a clap falls are thereby given any sort of accent. They may or they may not be accented, the accents arising — as we have seen — merely from the natural rhythm of the melody on the one hand or the speech accentuation of the text on the other. The claps exist purely as a pattern or grid on which the tune and words are built. It is most important to grasp this feature of the clapping. Rhythmically it is neutral: but structurally it is of the utmost importance. However many times a song may be sung, the claps will always fall in identical places, either on or between the same syllables.

Handclaps fall into two main classes: the simpler is the "divisive" class, where there is a regular steady clap which divides time into equal intervals: the more complex is the "additive" class, where the claps consist of a pattern in irregular time — the name indicating that the pattern is made by adding together little pieces of time of different lengths. The pattern itself forms a complete unit which is exactly repeated as often as required.

Each of these main classes can itself be subdivided according to the number of basic time-units which belong to each clap. In the case of divisive (regular) claps, the interval between each clap will consist of either two or of three basic time units. In any one

song, the claps must be either wholly duple (two basic time-units) or triple (three basic units). It is totally impossible in Africa, in a regular clapping, for the claps to contain sometimes two, sometimes three time-units. In additive clap-patterns, the important figure is the total number of basic time-units contained in the complete pattern. This will probably add up to 8, 12 or maybe 16 units. The total units are subdivided by the claps in an irregular way. Thus a pattern of 8 units may be broken by the claps into the formula 3 + 3 + 2, that is, two triple-time claps plus one duple-time clap: or a total of 12 units may be, and usually is, clapped by two duple claps plus one triple clap, then one duple clap and a triple clap, yielding the formula 2 + 2 + 3 + 2 + 3 basic units of time.

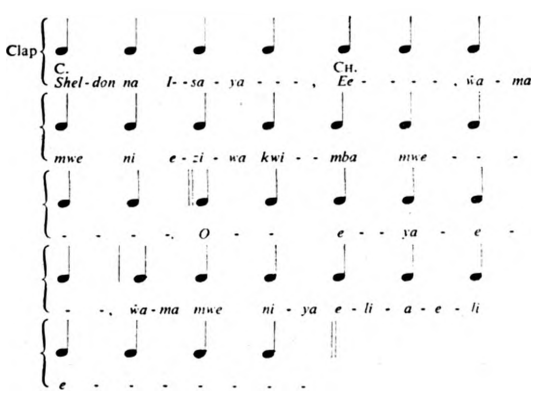
We have spoken of basic time-units: what are they? In any African song, some notes are of short duration, some are longer and a few are very long. Generally speaking the longer notes are always compounded of an exact multiple of the short notes. So we can reckon the short notes as the basic time-units. For clarity in transcription experience shows that it is best to represent the basic unit as a quaver. To follow the argument, the non-musical reader will need merely to remember that if a quaver is *one* time-unit, then a crotchet is *two* units, and a dotted crotchet is *three* units of time. Occasionally there are slight complications such as two rapid syllables together worth one quaver, or more frequently, triplets where three syllables are sung to only two quavers, but the simple divisions given above form the solid groundwork of the system.

In the examples which follow, the tune, which is irrelevant to our purpose, is omitted. The point at issue is the relationship of the text to the handclaps, for it is the handclaps which reveal the metre. What conclusions can be drawn as to the nature of the texts used?

1. DUPLE METRE

(C. = Cantor — Ch. = Chorus)

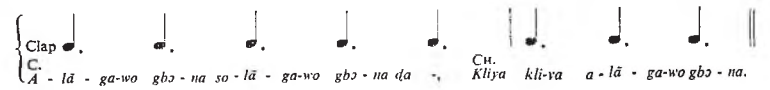
GIRLS' SONG NSENGA TRIBE NORTHERN RHODESIA



Two points are to be noted here. Some of the words in this very simple example have two syllables to a clap and no word has more than two: it is thus in duple form. Secondly, and this is very important, the claps are organized in groups: the first half of the text consists of 4 + 12 claps — total 16: the second has 6 + 10 claps — total 16. Now however many tectual verses were to be composed for this song they would all have to conform to this overall clap phrasing. One could not, for example, start the second verse with a text which occupied six claps — it can only be four. So the song text is basically duple and has a definite organization of the claps in each line. It must therefore be metrical.

2. Triple Metre

(*a*) FISH-NET HAULING SONG EWE TRIBE GHANA

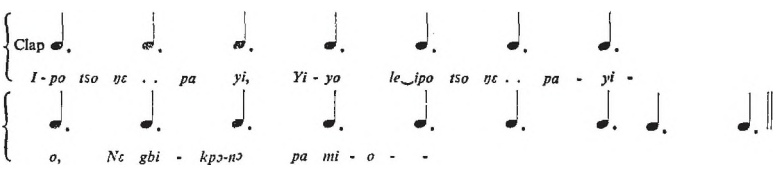


In this song the pulses are marked, not by claps, but by the fishermen who are hauling in the net. As they do so, they all simultaneously take successive steps backwards, the footfall marking the pulses.

This is a very simple and straightforward example. The rule is clear — each footfall contains three basic time-units and there is a syllable in the text provided for each of these units. The only exception is the last syllable of the Cantor's words: this occupies the third unit of one footfall and the first unit of the next one, that is, it has two time-units. Note also that the first syllable of the song — the whole of which is repeated *ad lib.* — belongs to the last footfall, and represents its third time-unit.

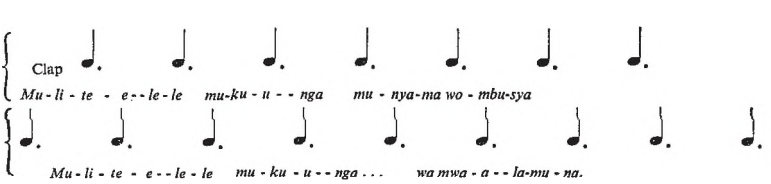
The footfalls are further organized thus: Cantor's line — 5 footfalls, Chorus line — 3 footfalls, making a total of 8 for the verse. Quite obviously this lyric is strictly metrical.

(*b*) SONG FOR GAME CALLED ABOLO ADAIJME TRIBE GHANA



This song accompanies a game played with stones. Twelve players, each with a pebble, kneel in a circle and pass the pebbles round in a counter-clockwise direction, making a pass exactly where we have placed the notes above the text. The basic metre is, as can be seen, triple, but the text is not quite so simply applied to the metre as in the previous example. The second and sixth pulses do not fall *on* a syllable but *between* **x**ɛ and *pa-*, thus introducing a feeling of staggering the beat. The reason for this is that **x** is a long syllable and needs to occupy the time of two quavers, and as it starts on the third quaver of the first (and fifth) pulse, it is protracted through the first quaver of the following pulse. Note also that the initial *i-* of *ipo* is elided with the preceding vowel. This is a true elision, for the combined syllable *le-i* counts only one quaver.

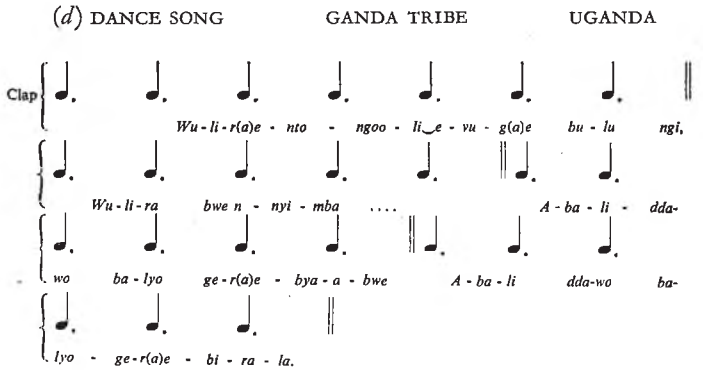
(*c*) HUNTERS' SONG TONGA TRIBE NORTHERN RHODESIA



Examining the syllables, we see there are three syllables to a clap except for the last syllable of *mukuunga*, and this syllable is prolonged to cover two units of time. So the claps are on a triple basis — three basic units of time to each clap. The claps themselves are arranged in two sets of eight, and again one emphasizes that this organization must

apply to all verses. Because of these factors, the song text must be metrical: it is in a triple metre.

It is hardly to be expected that a poet could always conceive of a text which flows so regularly. Just as with us, the African poet may use certain conventions when he has too many syllables to follow the rule rigorously. First, he may squeeze two short syllables into the time of one basic time-unit: secondly, and this is a very common ploy, he may put three syllables where there ought only to be two, thus slightly shortening them: thirdly, in a triple metre, he may put two syllables of equal length where there ought to be three, thus lengthening them: fourthly, he may elide the final vowel or coalesce it with a following vowel, the difference being that while in the former case the resulting syllable occupies only one time-unit, in the latter it will count at least two. The following example illustrates such a coalescence.



Four coalescences can be seen: the final *-a* of *wulira* disappears in singing: so does the final *-i* of *entongooli*, and the final *-a* of *evuga*, and of *balyogera*.

This song has not only a clap but also a drum accompaniment in steady triple time, and the syllables of the song fall exactly on one or other of the drum beats. Here is double confirmation that the text is metrical. Now because the claps fall on every third drum beat, each clap occupies three basic time-units and is therefore essentially triple in nature — it is a three pulse clap. Further, because the syllables of the text are clearly integrated with this three-pulse clap, the composer must have had this triple clap in mind when conceiving it, and so the text itself is based on a triple metre.

An interesting point now arises. If there are three time-units in each clap, the simplest textual arrangement is to give three syllables to each clap — one for each time-unit — and this is what very often happens. But suppose that the exigencies of the text compel one to give only two syllables to a particular clap. In this case there are three possibilities, all of which are used by the African. He can give the first syllable one time-unit, in which case the second syllable will be a long one, occupying two units: or, vice versa, the first syllable may be long and the second short: thirdly, he may make both syllables equal in length, each counting one-and-a-half time-units.

In the above example we have tried to space the syllables so as to show what is happening. Several points emerge. Take the word *entongooli:* the first syllable counts two time-units, and that leaves one unit for *-nto-:* but this syllable is prolonged to swallow the first unit of the next clap, so that *-nto-* also is long, with two time-units: the next syllable *-ngoo-* also has two units, while the final syllable *-li* must be short, i.e. worth only one unit, as it is coalesced. Wherever there is a coalescence, the supplanting vowel is seen to be worth two units. All the syllables starting with a nasal occupy at least two units. Lastly, there is the word *abaliddawo*. The syllable *-li-* appears to have two time-units: but it is, in our view, more probable that the subsequent double consonant needs

time to be generated and that the true position is that *-li-* has one unit and *-dda-* has two.

The point which has to be decided is this: are the syllables assigned short or long values because the *music* demands it, or because in *speech* they are short or long by nature? Examination of these African lyrics seems to show that it is the intrinsic length of the spoken syllable which is the determining factor. If a syllable is short by nature, it can apparently count only one time-unit: if long by nature, it will normally count at least two units, though we have evidence that a certain amount of liberty is tolerated and long syllables can be encountered which occupy only one time-unit.

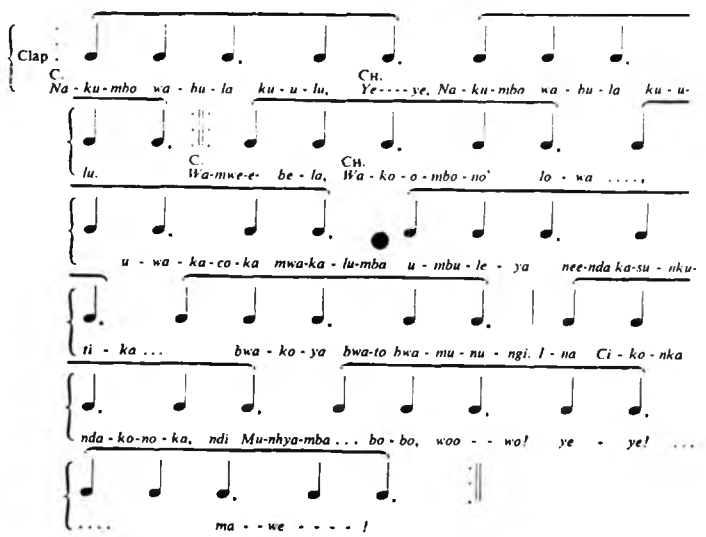
The overall organization of the verse as shown by the claps is this: the first two lines contain 7 and 5 claps respectively — total 12: the last two lines have 6 each — total once more is 12. Thus the lyric is mathematically and metrically consistent, being a composition in triple metre.

3. Irregular Metre

How many irregular metres exist in Africa we cannot say but those known to us all exhibit the principles we have been setting out. There is one such metre so widespread that it might be called the standard irregular metre, and we shall take it as typical of this class. It is found in South, Central, East and West Africa — it may in fact be universal in the continent, and yet it is completely strange to us Westerners. It is an additive clap-pattern, whose total phrase of 12 basic time-units is subdivided by the claps in this way: 2 + 2 + 3 + 2 + 3.

The whole phrase is repeated as often as required by the song. Let us see what happens when this metre forms the background of a lyric.

(*a*) WOMEN'S INYIMBO TONGA TRIBE NORTHERN RHODESIA

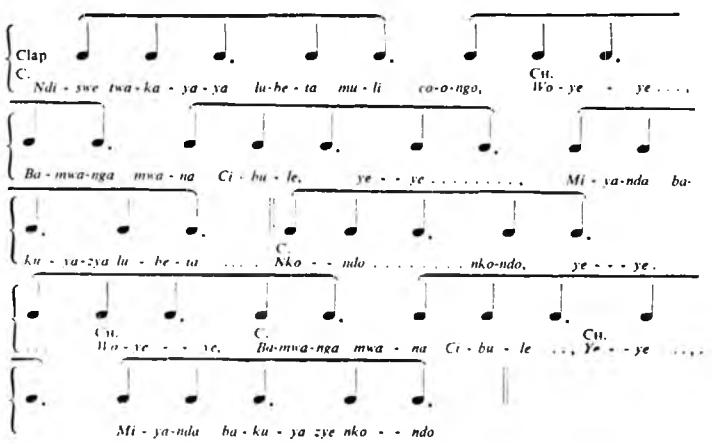


Clearly the text is organized *vis-à-vis* this clap-pattern on the same rules as those governing our earlier examples. The basis of the relationship is the single time-unit. For the most part the rule is one syllable to every basic time-unit. The chorus word *ye-ye* has two time-units on each syllable. At the second chorus entry, the last syllable in the word *wakoombono* containing a coalescence, takes two time-units. A little further on, since the last syllable of *umbuleya* has two time-units, thus absorbing one unit from the following clap, there are only two units left to accommodate three syllables — *neenda ka-*. These three syllables are rendered as a short triplet — i.e. three in the time of two, an example of African usage already referred to.

The metrical organization of the lines is shown in the way the complete clap-patterns are grouped. The words for Cantor and Chorus up to the first double lines go together and are set against two clap-patterns: as this section is then repeated the total is four clap-patterns. The next section — as far as the subdivision in meaning at the word *hwamunungi* has four patterns and this is followed by another three patterns. All this second section is then repeated and thus amounts to $(4 + 3) \times 2 = 14$ patterns, bringing the grand total for the whole piece to 18 clap-patterns. Once again, the whole conceptual framework on which the words are built is rigidly metrical.

A further example from the same tribe — though almost any tribe would serve our purpose — shows the remaining device we mentioned as being used by African poets. It is the case of two syllables of equal length occupying three time-units:

(*b*) MEN'S INYIMBO TONGA TRIBE NORTHERN RHODESIA



The two equal-length syllables occur at the end of the second clap-pattern and again at the end of the sixth, viz. *-nga mwa-*, where they occupy three time-units. There is no need for much comment: the nasalized CCV syllables nearly all take two time-units or more, but in the fourth and eighth pattern one notes with interest that the syllable *-nda* uses only one time-unit. This seems to indicate that the normal rule may on occasions be broken.

The whole lyric has a fairly simple overall framework. The first four lines of poetry taken together occupy four clap-patterns though their individual lengths are unequal: similarly the last four lines also take four clap-patterns.

Suppose now, we put ourselves in the shoes of an African song-poet. He thinks of a line, shall we say, which scans to the triple-metre clap. He now thinks of a second line but finds he cannot clap to it as the number and nature of the syllables will not fit. He cannot possibly use this line: he *must* think again. Apart from the few accommodations we have mentioned, the scanning of the text in relation to the clap-pulses is inexorably rigorous. The same situation arises when he has completed one verse and wants to compose another. This time he is still further straitened: for while in making the first verse he had freedom to set it up in any aesthetically acceptable framework of clap-groupings, now he must not only get his number and nature of syllables right but the total length of the lines must agree with those of the first verse. In short, however free and undisciplined the texts of these lyrics may appear to the casual eye, in reality they are subject to just as rigorous restraints as are the verses of our Western poetry. They are, in fact, strictly metrical compositions.

No mention has yet been made of the all-important part which speech-tones play in these lyrics. The question falls outside the scope of this essay which is concerned with metre. Nevertheless it is worth stating that their significance lies mainly with the tune of the song. There is generally a high degree of correlation — in the region of 80 per cent — between the rise and fall of the text as spoken and the rise and fall of the melody. The matter has been discussed elsewhere[1]: it is a melodic and not a rhythmic question and need not therefore detain us.

Some attempt may now be made to summarize the results of this study. We may do this by once more comparing the system underlying African lyrics with our own poetic scansions. The African scansion is certainly not accentual. It is much more akin to the classical quantitative metre. It has, as its basis, the *mora* — the unit time of the length of spoken short syllables. These units may be organized divisively, that is, in regularly recurring groups containing the same number of units all through the poem. Or the organization may be additive, consisting of groups of unequal numbers of *morae* linked together to produce an acceptable rhythmic phrase: this phrase is adopted as the metrical basis of the poem, being repeated right through it. Whichever of these two bases is employed, the lines of the lyrics are organized in feet consisting of a fixed number of these groups of *morae*, the lines not necessarily containing the same number of feet. So far as our observation goes, the possibilities available to the composer as to the number of feet in a line are considerable — and we do not yet know how many such possibilities there are. The controlling factor is that the total number of feet in a verse will add up to a multiple of two or a multiple of three, or a combination of the two. Thus example 3 (*b*) consists of two sets of 4 clap-phrases — the total is a multiple of two. Example 3 (*a*) has 2×2 patterns plus $(4 + 3) \times 2$ patterns, making a grand total of 18 patterns — which is a multiple of three arrived at by a combination of multiples of both two and three.

This is the general situation and it is as far as a musician such as the writer is, is competent to get. But it is not the end of the matter. There are many details we need to know, should we ourselves wish to compose such a lyric: and these lie directly in the field of the linguist. For instance it is obvious that the notion of *morae* is integral to the system. Under what circumstances, then, must syllables which are linguistically long, be treated as long ones in the lyrics and when may they be reckoned as short? What are the rules governing elisions or coalescences —do they always count as long syllables? Are they such as normally occur in prose or are there special liberties in this regard (like the English poetic contraction of 'The' to 'Th' ') — and if so, what? When two equal-length syllables occupy the place of three time-units, must they always be by nature long ones or can short syllables be used here? What rules apply when three syllables are squeezed into two time-units (short triplet) — must they always be by nature short? What is the rule for nasalized CCV forms? It seems to the writer that the letter '*n*' in first position is much more likely to produce a long syllable than the letter '*m*'. Is this true? — and under what circumstances is it allowable to treat a nasalized syllable like *-nda-* as a short one, as in the example quoted.

Here is a well-defined investigation for some linguist to conduct. It may well be that he will need the help of a musician accustomed to listening to African songs when marking where the claps fall. It is surprisingly difficult to do this, though an African singer of at least medium education can usually be taught to mark them in himself once he has become aware of the problem.

There are countless thousands of these metrical lyrics and every year thousands more come into popularity, for they are an integral part of the astonishingly creative and living African musical tradition. They form the bulk of the textual material with which the ethnomusicologist has to deal. On the other hand, it is probably the other

1 A. M. Jones, *Studies in African Music*, Vol. I, Chapter 10, London, 1959.

more obviously poetic forms of African verse which normally attract the attention of the linguist. Yet full justice cannot be done to these lyrics by the ethnomusicologist alone: it is our hope that what has been said may succeed in engaging the interest of linguistic scholars, without whose expertize the rationale of these lyrics cannot fully be brought to light.