THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LYRICS AND MELODY IN RỊMI VOCAL MUSIC

by

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This article on Rịmi vocal music is written with two purposes in mind: 1) to introduce the reader to Rịmi music, and 2) to demonstrate the correlation between a tonal language and vocal music. To achieve this goal a very simple finger counting song has been chosen for analysis.

The Arịmi (Wanyaturu) are a Bantu ethnic group of Central Tanzania numbering 246,317 according to the 1967 census. They have a mixed agricultural-pastoral economy adapted to the region's sparse annual rainfall of 25 inches during a period of five consecutive months.

A study of Rịmi vocal music was made in conjunction with the author's linguistic analysis of the language. Since culture is a whole, and music is associated with so many aspects of the culture, linguistic research, of necessity, entailed an examination of Rịmi music. It was found that a knowledge of vocal music gave clues and corroboration to the tonal analysis of the language. Moreover, the study of the lyrics revealed many helpful examples of vowel coalescence.

Analyzing music and language together yielded an insight related to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941) was stimulated by the provocative views of Edward Sapir (1884-1939), an anthropologist and linguist, regarding the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena, thought and speech in particular. As a consequence he developed this hypothesis: "We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation." This means that thought is forced by the internal metaphysics of a language (its morphological and syntactical structures) into certain predetermined channels.

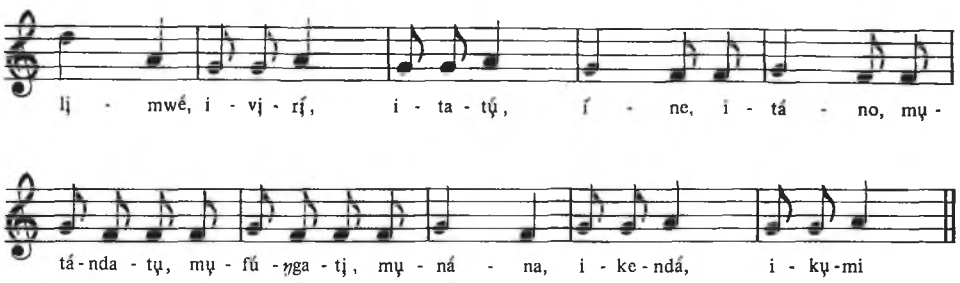
By extension, then, one can say that just as a melodic line is circumscribed by the musical scale it employs, so too, vocal music is conditioned by the tonal structure of the language of the lyrics. To paraphrase the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis musically one could express it this way: we sing and hear musically very largely as we do because the tonal structure of the language predisposes certain choices of patterns of performance and interpretation. Consequently if one is to sing correctly there are certain intervals and sequences that may not be employed while using the Rịmi language.

Rịmi vocal music observes strictly its correlation with speech tone according to fixed rules. One might assume this to be obvious. However, in the case of Swahili popular music, words and melody repeatedly collide with apparent indifference. Swahili, the national language of Tanzania, is not a tone language, but its chief prosodic feature is penultimate stress. At the end of phrases particularly, Swahili popular music often forces an iambic metre on words where a trochaic stress is needed.[1]

Rịmi, like many Bantu languages, is a tone language. It has only two tonemes, one high and the other low. This language has seven vowels, and the vowel always carries the tone. In the orthography the high tone is indicated with an acute accent, since it is the less frequent tone. Unmarked vowels have low tone. In the lyrics the tone will be marked to aid the reader in understanding the intimate relationship between speech and song.

Throughout the remainder of this article the term "note" will refer to the music, and the term "tone" will refer to the pitch of the syllable as it is spoken or sung. In examining the relationship of speech and song in Rịmi, for the sake of convenience, the music will be described in terms of the lyrics, as though the tone of the latter determined the notes of the former. This manner of description is arbitrary, but will serve our purpose satisfactorily. It should be remembered that in Rịmi culture there is no combination of Rodgers and Hammerstein working together, but the minstrel is both poet and musician. His music is produced with words and melody simultaneously in a blend of mutual dependence.

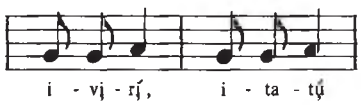
The song introduced for our study is one used in teaching children to count from one to ten. As they sing they count by turning over the open fingers of the left hand with the index finger of the right hand, starting with the little finger, finger by finger up to five. Commencing with six a similar process is followed with the right hand.



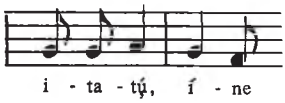
From this song two main rules emerge expressing the correlation between lyrics and melody in Rịmi vocal music.

1. The note immediately following a high tone must be sung lower than the high tone. This is true irrespective of whether the high tone is followed by a low tone or another high tone.

For example, *ivịrį́* with final high tone is followed by *itatṵ́* with initial low tone as:



Another example is *itatṵ́* with final high tone being followed by *íne* with initial high tone as:

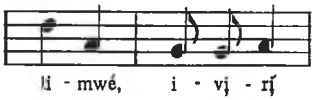


Rule no. 1 regarding the high tone and its following note pertains in all positions:

initially	as	*íne*
medially	as	*itáno, mṵtándatṵ, mṵfúŋgatị, mṵnána*
finally	as	*lịmwé, ivịrí, itatṷ́, ikendá*

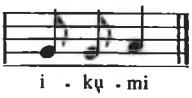
2. A note higher than the note adjacent to it does not necessarily imply the existence of a corresponding high tone.

For example, *lịmwé* which has a low-high speech pattern can be sung as it is, because the following word, *ivịrí*, starts on a lower note as:



The case of *lịmwé* above in which a high note is sung on a low tone and a lower note is sung on a high tone substantiates the fact that what is significant musically is not what note *precedes* the high tone, but what note *follows* the high tone.

Another example of Rule no. 2 is found in the last word of this song, *ikṵmi*. The basic tone of this word is low-low-high, but a characteristic of the morphotonemics of the Rịmi language is the loss of final high tone at the end of an utterance. Therefore in the environment of this song where *ikṵmi* is the last word of the song it is permissible to sing the last syllable on a note higher than that of its preceding low tone as:



because it is not followed by anything.

The two rules elucidated in this article apply to Rịmi vocal music generally, but for the sake of brevity and clarity the use of this counting song only was considered adequate.

NOTES

1. Iambic = short-long, trochaic = long-short