



E. K. Ogunmola during the Opening Glee  
of "Love of Money."

## YORUBA FOLK OPERAS

*by*

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MANY people today are worried about the fate of African culture. The great carving tradition of West Africa is almost a thing of the past and African music is more and more neglected all over the continent.

Many Europeans and a handful of Africans crusade for the "preservation" of African culture. But one cannot expect traditional art forms to survive unchanged, when the people are changing as rapidly as they are now. Any philosophy of life must produce its own symbols to express itself, and as the attitude to life changes, it will find new forms and a new language. We do not expect Stravinsky or Benjamin Britten to write music like Mozart or Beethoven, and we cannot expect Christian Africans with European education to go on producing the virile music of their forefathers.

The real tragedy is that those Africans who have moved out of the circle of traditional life usually do not find any artistic language at all. The contact with the New Religion and with European politics, trade and education has all too often squashed rather than stimulated creativity. The somewhat forceful Westernization of Africans was frequently accompanied by a loss of self-confidence and inhibitions which in turn have produced something like a temporary cultural vacuum with modern Africans.

Yet here and there, in this traditional age, we see already emerge the first representatives of a new African culture. Anybody interested in the future of Africa must take an interest and give encouragement to these pioneers, who give expression to the new age.

One such new development is the growth of a folk opera in Yoruba country in Western Nigeria. This development is less than a decade old, yet today there are about

half a dozen "theatre parties", as they call themselves, who perform musical plays all over the country.

Let me pick out a typical group : "Ogunmola's Theatre Party" from an inland town, Ado-Ekiti. E. K. Ogunmola is a schoolmaster in a junior primary school. He is about thirty years old and has written and produced plays for the last seven years. His company consists of fellow teachers, schoolchildren, traders, seamstresses, etc. All have some degree of primary education and all are Christians. The plays are all written in Yoruba and the dialogue is almost entirely sung. The orchestra consists of a set of drums (mostly European instruments), and a cheap European tin flute. This orchestra, however, provides little more than a background rhythm ; the musical interest lies almost entirely with the vocal parts. These are pleasant tunes, little influenced by European music and strictly based on the tone patterns of the Yoruba spoken language. In writing Yoruba songs, the melody must never be allowed to rise when the spoken word has a falling tone, etc., or else the meaning may be completely mauled. For in Yoruba, a word may have two or three different meanings if pronounced with two or three different tone patterns.

The acting in the plays is spontaneous and compelling. Good stage effects are achieved by a natural feeling for theatre rather than by laborious production.

Dances are a prominent feature of the plays. Every opera in fact opens with a special song and dance number called the Opening Glee in which the audience is told about the story they are about to see and the moral of the play is drawn even before it has begun.

The plays mostly deal with human vices and weaknesses and the misfortune they bring on the transgressor and his friends. Pride, greed, jealousy, disobedience and selfishness are the vices attacked by Ogunmola. His plots are not traditional material. Some, like the opera "Joseph and his Brethren" are biblical stories, but most are everyday events from an entirely Yoruba setting. Even in the biblical plays Ogunmola makes no attempt to provide a "period piece", but transfers the whole scene to Western Nigeria. The pharaoh of Egypt is clothed and behaves like a Yoruba "oba".

Typical subjects of Ogunmola's plays are : the man who is deserted by his beautiful wife when he loses his money ; the prince who is in difficulty because he has become a Christian, while his people are still pagans ; the unfaithful friends, who bring misfortune to the man they envy ; the strong-headed child, who is punished for his disobedience. There is one play, which deals with the first coming of the Christian missionaries to Africa. On the whole, there is a strange lack of topical subjects : the new nationalism, the fight for self-government, racial relations with Europeans, new social developments among Africans do not enter into Ogunmola's plays at all. And yet, we may call this "modern" African art. Because here is music and poetry not connected with traditional rites or festivals. It is one of the first specimens of Yoruba profane art. Moreover, it is appealing mostly to the modern elements in Yoruba society, giving entertainment to teachers, clerks and craftsmen, while at the same time appealing to their consciences.

Ogunmola has hardly the power and virility of traditional Yoruba art. His rhythms lack the complexity and the richness of pagan Yoruba drumming. But there is a compelling simplicity and sincerity in his work. The poetry of the operas gets lost, of course, in translation. But still, this short "opening glee" from the play "Love of Money", in the poet's own translation, may help the reader to catch something of the atmosphere of the plays.

The World is spoilt already, for  
 The love of money reigns supreme in the world.  
 He, who has money is the beloved,  
 He is popular, who has the money.  
 He is the mighty who controls the money,  
 He is the one honoured by all,  
 Even if he is worse than Lucifer, or uglier than the bull.  
 He is the one preferred, the well charactered,

The Gentleman, the wisest on earth,  
 A word from him is final, because  
 The world is spoilt already, for  
 The love of money reigns supreme in the world.  
 Oh come ye all, hear what Mopelola did,  
 Come all ye people to see the trickish girl,  
 Mopelola—the most beautiful girl  
 Mopelola—the wife of a thousand husbands, who  
 For money's sake, married Adeleke,  
 For wealth's sake, married Adeleke.  
 She promised Adeleke vehemently  
 Not to leave him for life.  
 When things were alright with Adeleke,  
 Mopelola eats, drinks, and dresses gorgeously  
 Like the low tide of the sea or the fine wave of the Lagoon  
 Her head tie is superb  
 She dazzles the eyes with her shoes,  
 When she powders she is like a goddess.  
 But when things change, that woe befell Adeleke,  
 Mopelola trickishly left him in his misery.  
 Ah the perversity of human beings!  
 Human confidence is real vanity,  
 Human confidence is no use.  
 To trust God is always the best,  
 We know only those that we love,  
 Without knowing those that love us.  
 If your kith and kin do not conspire against you,  
 An outside enemy can not overpower you,  
 May mighty God protect us.  
 The World is spoilt already, for  
 The love of money, reigns supreme in the world.

## THE ROLE OF THE DRUMMER IN AKAN SOCIETY

by

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### I

DRUMMING is widely enjoyed in all Akan communities of the Gold Coast, but unlike singing, the performers are fewer than might be expected, for the art of drumming requires skill and perfection which only a few attain. Moreover opportunities of drumming and learning to drum are not open to all. In social life all the important forms of drumming are carried on by individuals or groups of individuals selected from the male section of various Akan communities. Women do not drum as a rule, first because drumming is strenuous, and second because in the past it was thought that a woman might defile the drums, particularly those of the state, since some of the important drums, like other things, were not to be touched by a woman in her monthly period.<sup>1</sup> The only drums that women were allowed to play and still do play are the *donno*<sup>2</sup> drums which are used during the celebration of puberty rites for girls.

Drumming then, is the business of a few individuals in various communities holding the office in the state, or appointed by common consent of a band or an association to perform for all because of the skill, knowledge and reliability they have shown. Correlating with the principal agencies of drumming, there are drummers of popular bands,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Rattray, *Asbanti*, p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> Arm-pit drum control found in the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast and in a few other West African territories. It is sometimes described as the "hour-glass drum".