

EAST AND WEST, NORTH AND SOUTH

by

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(The figures in the text refer to the Record List at the end of the essay)

"EAST and West, North and South, 'Frisco to Perim. . . ." So we used to sing in a drawing-room ballad whose context certainly had nothing to do with African music. Yet the universality suggested by the points of the compass has a bearing on that music, which becomes ever more cogent as research penetrates more and more of the great continent.

The area which hitherto has received most attention from the African Music Society because the society happens to have been born within its boundaries, is Bantu Africa, that is the part of Africa in which all the languages spoken by the various tribes belong to one language family—the Bantu family. According to Professor Malcolm Guthrie, and if we omit the finer points of the boundary which he gives, Bantu Africa is the enormous tract of country which lies south of a line drawn from the mouth of the Niger River on the West coast (lat. 5 deg. N), through Nairobi and out to the East coast on the equator. A fair amount of musical research has been going on in the Bantu area and there is no longer any room for doubt that, besides belonging to the same language family, the hundreds of tribes living in Bantu Africa, in spite of constant variations in practice from tribe to tribe, have essentially the same underlying musical system. That this system has been disturbed in some instances by factors of whose origin we have little or no exact knowledge at present—as in the case of the Chopi xylophone scales—is fairly evident, but this does not alter the fact that *au fond* the singing and the rhythms of the whole area rest on a common foundation. Bantu Africa accounts for not more than about a third of the continent. North of the Bantu line there is the huge area of the West African languages in the West, then moving Eastwards, the Sudanic family and on the East, the Hamitic languages. What of the music of these millions and millions of Africans? Judging by their different language-structures we have no reason to expect that their music will be anything like that of the Bantu area. In fact, a visitor to the Hausa country in West Africa will doubtless be able to say that at any rate among the Hausa the musical system is quite different (1).

There is a simple explanation of this, and it has to be borne in mind whenever we study the music of any part of Africa which has contact with Arab culture. Africans are as prone to assimilate Arabic musical practice as they have proved themselves adept at absorbing modern American dance music and Western choral singing. Arabic music is based on principles far removed from those of Bantu music. It has its roots in the East and is much more akin to that of India. Its notable characteristics are first monody: wherever there is Arab influence there will be a virtually total absence of harmony in vocal music and everything will be sung in unison. Secondly, Arab music rests on a formalised rhythmic framework which is much simpler than the typical Bantu cross-rhythms. If you play a record of Arab or Arab-influenced music, you will probably hear a *single* rhythm as a background to the song, and this rhythm will often sound fairly comprehensible to a European ear. There is none of the complex interweaving of contrasted rhythm-patterns characteristic of Bantu music. Thirdly and this is, I think, an infallible guide, Arab vocal music is always nasal in timbre and most important of all, the melodic line has frequent mordents or shakes (2). This feature is, in my experience, absolutely foreign to the Bantu tradition. The Bantu, like the English and the West generally, sing a tune in a straightforward manner and do not embellish their melodies with grace-notes, cadenzas, or trills of any sort.

The Arab influence in West Africa, coming down from Islamic countries in the north, has made a plain mark in the music of the people. The Hausa music I have heard

(e.g. 3) is more or less uncompromisingly Arab in style and other tribes in West Africa have been similarly affected. The southern extremity of this area is approximately lat. 10 deg. S. : in between this line and the northern limits of the Bantu line there is a belt of country, 5 deg. in width from north to south, in which we find a curious situation. At first blush many tribes would be classed as being in the Arab musical tradition : but if we look closely at, say, the Yoruba people, we find that while the typical Arab unison singing is prevalent and also the use of mordents (4), yet lying underneath all the time is the typical music of the Bantu style (5). Some Yoruba songs might have been sung in Central Africa : the basic style is one and the same. In this same area which, let us remind the reader, is outside the Bantu Africa line, we find half the tribes singing and beating drums in a manner which is utterly un-Arab : a manner which is in fact indistinguishable from the practices of Bantu Africa. In short it is one and the same musical tradition (6). We find vocal harmony everywhere, we find the typical centrality of the drum *ensemble* in the tribal social culture, and so on. The broad conclusion is that over in the North-west, discounting Moslem influence, the musical system of the Africans, although they are classified as belonging to different language families, is the same system as that with which we are familiar in Central and South Africa.

Exactly the same happens on the East coast. The Swahili-speaking peoples have to a greater or lesser extent absorbed the Arab tradition where Arab influence has been strong, particularly in the coastal belt lying between 5 deg. north and 5 deg. south of the latitude of Zanzibar, and yet one can play numerous records of their music which are pure Bantu in principle and in execution (7). Whereas on the West coast we were confronted with NON-bantu people who had been influenced by Arab culture, here in the East we find genuine Bantu tribes responding in exactly the same way. But the point we wish to stress is not the Arab style, but the continuing presence of the real and original music of the peoples concerned. The Arab style is patently an influence imposed from outside on a musical system which whether within or outside the Bantu line, is the same music.

This statement contains two different and sweeping thoughts, first that the whole of Bantu Africa is a musical entity, and second that families of tribes outside the Bantu area share with the Bantu the same musical practice. To substantiate this thesis we will take both ideas together. We will glance at a few musical practices which appear to belong to the same tradition whether they occur inside or outside Bantu Africa.

Professor Kirby in his *Musical Instruments of the Native Races of South Africa* (which incidentally has just been republished) mentions a single-stringed instrument used by the southern Basuto and called a *Thomo* or *Tuomo*. Mr. Hugh Tracey, and also Mrs. Trowell and Dr. Wachsman in their book on Uganda Arts and Crafts, describe a kind of lyre used in the very north of the Bantu area around the east of Lake Victoria by the Luo and other tribes, and also in the Southern Sudan, and called a *Tboum* or *Tbum*. Is this a coincidence of terminology? or is there some remote connection? they are both stringed instruments with resonators.

In Northern Rhodesia the Bemba make a special use of axe-blades in music. Three men each holding a pair of axe-blades chink them together, forming three interwoven rhythm patterns as a charming rhythmic background to a song and chorus. I had formerly regarded this as a unique variant of handclapping. But in the Gold Coast the very foundation of drumming rhythms is an iron gong which beats a standard and never-changing pattern (8). In one style of music among the Ewe people there, instead of drums, gongs are used as a rhythmic orchestra. There are two small ones called *Aroke* and two or more large ones called *Gankogui*. These are beaten with small iron bars and the skilful, complex interweaving of patterns makes a wonderful sound. Now the Gold Coast is outside the Bantu area, but the Bemba axe-blades and the Ewe gongs are unmistakably manifestations of the same musical technique. Go right across Africa once again, to the Luo tribe near Lake Victoria and we find them making an iron chinking sound as a background to their singing (9). It is just the same sort of rhythmic bell-like

background. West Africa, Central and East Africa, bantu and non-bantu all using the chink of iron for rhythm : is there no underlying unity here?

Speaking of rhythms calls to mind the ubiquity of one special pattern which might almost be labelled the African signature tune. It is used in Central and in East Africa in which places it appears in two forms, either as :—



or sometimes reversed, as :—



We notice that it adds up to a phrase of 12-quaver length, which is subdivided either as 2+2+3 : 2+3 or as 2+3 : 2+2+3. Precisely the same rhythm forms the standard Gong-gong pattern which is the very backbone of a great variety of songs and drumming on the Gold Coast and thereabouts. Whatever the drums are doing they depend on and take their cue from the Gong-gong, which beats :—



Expressed in quavers this is 2+3 : 2+2+3—just the same as the Central African clap pattern (10). Once again we find that this fundamental rhythm extends right across Africa both inside and outside the Bantu line.

Handclaps are the background rhythm for singing : and in singing we find in spite of a wealth of variety in detail, an essential unity in style, or rather a stream of essential styles which knit not only Bantu Africa but large areas outside it into a homogeneous musical group. First we notice the prevalence of the “call and response” type of song, where a cantor sings the verses whose words differ for each verse while everybody else sings a fixed and invariable chorus. By itself this feature is only negative evidence for it is probably a general custom in primitive social singing. But the presence of this custom does show there is no cleavage in custom. If in one part of Africa—say in one language area—we found that people did not sing in this way, then we should have evidence against the homogeneity of African music : but it is not so : the “call and response” pattern of singing is everywhere the custom (11).

To those accustomed to listening to Bantu singing there is something in the general style of music which, though very hard to analyse or to describe, yet is unmistakable. Listening, for instance, to two records, one can say at once “That is typical Bantu music,” or *vice versa*. Particularly useful is this “style” in discriminating the presence or absence of Arab influence. The Yoruba sing sometimes in one, sometimes in the other style, but even though they are non-Bantu people, when they sing in the style which is not Arabic, one recognises at once, “This is typical Bantu music.” The same style is used by the huge Akan group of tribes in West Africa, and going farther West,

by the Mende, the Temne and the Susu. We have now arrived almost at the most westerly point of the great bulge of Africa, some 1,500 miles from the northern limits of the Bantu area, yet we still have to say unequivocally, "This is typical Bantu singing." Yet there is more to it than a mere hazy awareness of something which makes the Bantu style. In Bantu Africa there are several characteristic kinds of chorus. Most of us know that four-square, virile, rather slow but very forceful type of chorus sung by the Zulus in South Africa (12). That is one typological feature of Bantu choral singing but not the only one. A different type is exemplified by the Bemba in Northern Rhodesia (13) whose choruses, in parallel thirds, have an even, legato, wave-like flow which is intensely musical. Yet again, a third type of chorus is that of the Nsenga (14) on the eastern border of Northern Rhodesia. This is a rapid style of bright, cheery singing and can be recognised anywhere. Now these styles are not restricted to the tribes mentioned, nor to the Bantu area. The Bemba style is used by the Chokwe (Northern Rhodesia), the Chwabo about 1,000 miles away on the far side of the Zambesi delta, and yet again by the Ibo near the mouth of the Niger and again by the Yoruba to the west and north-west of them, both of the latter being right out of Bantu country—to mention but one or two examples (15). The forthright heavy pounding Zulu style occurs among the Nande (16) and the Kikuyu far away in Kenya, also among the Gishu in Eastern Uganda and among the Chaga on the slopes of Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanganyika Territory. We do not omit to notice that the Nandi are outside the Bantu area, the others widely scattered within it. The same Zulu style is found among the Ibo in West Africa (non-Bantu). In the same way the Nsenga style occurs among the Ganda on the eastern side of the continent and right away over west, once more among the Ibo. If any further confirmation were needed, that whether within or without the Bantu area, we are dealing in the main, in Africa, with a homogeneous musical culture, let us visit the Teso, a Nilo-hamitic people living on the east of Lake Victoria, or the tribe of the Masai or the Kipsigis in Kenya, or further to the centre and the north, the Azande and Bandiya peoples in the Southern Sudan. They all live outside the Bantu line but their music is indistinguishable in its essential structure from that of the Bantu. It is one and the same music (17).

Lastly we turn to those splendid examples of African musical craftsmanship, the xylophones (18). Mr. Hugh Tracey has familiarised us all with the way the Chopi in Portuguese East Africa make use of their outstanding instruments in his *Chopi Musicians* (published by International African Institute). But the Chopi are by no means the only users of that instrument. Mr. Tracey has himself recorded xylophone music among the Luba in the southern Congo, the Nguja (Swahili area opposite Zanzibar), the Nsenga of Northern Rhodesia and the Shona of Southern Rhodesia. The distribution of the xylophone has been investigated by Dr. Olga Boone whose map shows its use in a broad belt between lat. 5–10 deg. North right across Africa from the West coast almost to the Nile, right outside the Bantu area. It is used by the Duala and the Fang on the West coast at the eastern end of the Gulf of Guinea, thus bringing the stream into the Bantu line. The whole of the south Congo area uses it and it occurs among the coastal tribes on the East coast between lat. 5 deg. N. and 5 deg. S. It thus spreads itself through and right beyond Bantu Africa both to the north and to the west. To claim it as a Bantu instrument would be false to the facts. It is supra-Bantu: and everywhere it makes the same sort of music.

Similarly, that other favourite African instrument, the *sansa* or Kaffir piano—though we must protest against the use of this latter name—is widely distributed, and not only in the Bantu areas. Common as it is over much of Central Africa, from the Sotho in the south, the Manyika in Southern Rhodesia, over the whole of Northern Rhodesia and into the Congo, it is yet found over in West Africa—to mention only two cases—among the Ga and the Ibo which are outside the Bantu line (19). The wide distribution itself is significant, but to crown it all, when listening to a record of *sansa* music played by these non-Bantu people, one finds that the sound is absolutely charac-

teristic of Bantu music. In short, the music is one and the same, whether it occurs within or without the Bantu area.

What are we to make of the evidence which music gives in Africa? It must by now be clear that we cannot restrict the areas of musical practice to the language family areas. However much the language changes, the music remains essentially the same, provided that it is not smothered by foreign influence. Have we here something which goes very deep in human nature? Has African music a tenacity greater than that of one's mother tongue? Is the language of music in Africa more permanent than the language of speech? If so, and the evidence does certainly seem to point that way, then we have, in this music, a criterion of race kinship more discriminating even than that of language. When we find very great areas of the African continent expressing their aesthetic sense in forms of music which are, as far as I know, unique in the musics of the world, and when we couple with this discovery the fact that all this music is a homogeneous culture whose many varieties of instrumental and vocal expression rest on a fundamental unity of musical principles, we realise that we are dealing not with a *congeries* of local musics, but with a widespread but unified culture. What is sung by the Bantu in South and Central Africa is sung in the same medium right outside their borders. We have pushed the musical boundary right away from the linguistic one. How far north does this music extend? Where is the ultimate boundary? Does virtually the whole of Africa show signs of its presence? Will further investigation reveal the "Bantu style" to be still present even in areas long subjected to Muslim domination and influence? We cannot say: much research remains to be done. Meanwhile the only boundary is the negative one of our own ignorance. But the discovery that the music of Africa is not restricted to language-family boundaries raises interesting considerations not only for the musician but also for the anthropologist and the historian. These considerations cannot and must not be ignored. The impact of musical evidence must be accorded a place side by side with the force of any other argument. Music has yet a vital part to play in the evaluation of things African.

RECORD LIST

1. Hausa (Nigeria) Decca WA 180, compare
Bantu (Sukuma tribe—Tanganyika) . . . Gallotone GB 1327 T
2. Arab Gallotone GB 1547 T
3. Hausa Decca WA 182
4. Yoruba (Arab style) Decca WA 1506 or WA 1632
5. Yoruba (Bantu style) Decca WA 212
6. Twi Decca WA 528
Ewe Decca WA 140
Ibo Decca WA 196
7. Nguja (Dar-es-Salaam) (Arab style) . . . Gallotone GB 1242 T
Shirazi (Zanzibar) (Bantu style) Gallotone GB 1255 T
8. Ewe Decca WA 139
9. Luo Trek DC 218 H
10. Ibo Decca WA 1700
Ewe Decca WA 547
11. Temne (Sierra Leone) Decca WA 2521
Nyamwezi (Tanganyika) Gallotone GB 1312 T
12. Zulu (South Africa) Gallotone GB 1037 T
Twi (West Africa) Decca WA 645
Mende (West Africa) Decca WA 2514
Susu (West Africa) Decca WA 2634
13. Bemba (Northern Rhodesia) Gallotone GB 1086
14. Nsenga (Northern Rhodesia) Trek DC 168 H
15. Chokwe Gallotone GB 1068 T
Chwabo Gallotone GB 1138 T
Ibo Decca WA 1559
Yoruba Decca WA 200
16. Zulu (South Africa) Gallotone GB 1037 T
Nandi (Kenya) Gallotone GB 1465 T
Gishu (Kenya) Gallotone GB 1502 T

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| 17. | Teso | Gallotone GB 1454 T |
| | Kipsigis | Gallotone GB 1470 T |
| 18. | Nguja (Zanzibar) | Gallotone GB 1254 T |
| | Chopi (Portuguese East Africa) | Gallotone GB 1046 T |
| | Luba (South Congo) | Gallotone GB 1112 |
| | Twi (West Africa) | Decca WA 617 |
| 19. | ZeZuru (Southern Rhodesia) | Gallotone GB 971 T |
| | Nyamwezi (Tanganyika) | Gallotone GB 1315 T |
| | Bisa (Northern Rhodesia) | Gallotone GB 1055 |
| | Ga (Gold Coast, West Africa) | Decca WA 626 |
| | Ibo (South Nigeria, West Africa) | Decca WA 1673 |
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MUSIC OF THE GOLD COAST

by

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WHAT do we mean by the term "music" in Africa? It is the combination of three things that are interdependent and never separated: dancing, singing and drumming. The songs are generally short and would probably be dull if it was not for the African's natural gift of improvisation—which is the very heart of music. Having to repeat the short songs over and over again, we have varied the tune with every repetition, improvising and adding extra notes and tones to keep up the listener's—and singer's—interest without totally departing from the particular harmony of the tune. This natural gift of improvisation, thought to be important by great musicians like Bach, is the sign of a man's true musicianship.

Apart from the variations I have briefly described, a singer combines mentally all the rich rhythm of the drums with all the complicated movements which a dancer makes. Thus, you see, the song, though short, has got other factors contributing to make it interesting.

ABUSIVE.

I say that the songs are short, but let me point out that in certain parts of the country the songs can last for up to 20 minutes without a single repetition. An instance is the practice of Halo among the Ewes of the Gold Coast. With them, when two villages have fallen out, they compose abusive songs against each other. These songs are generally directed at an offending Elder of the village who has not kept up with the unimpeachable character expected of him. These songs are very elaborate and can last up to even half an hour.

CROSS RHYTHM.

As prominence must be given to the songs, the drumming takes the form of song recitals, and the harmony of all the songs is not based on chords in their progressions as we know them in Western music. It is mainly a variation, and these variations give the song the true harmony which makes it essentially African.

In all music, rhythm is the very heart of the tune. So complicated is its nature that I think the average musician who is familiar with printed music can hardly follow its complexity. There is what we call "Cross Rhythm"—or playing one rhythm against another. This is so highly developed that an African can mentally cope with more than two rhythms at the same time. In any performance of indigenous music, you may have from six to eight drums playing together. Yet each of these drums plays a different, stereotyped rhythm, but when they are combined they produce the cross rhythm.

Apart from these we have the Master Drum which improvises all kinds of rhythm against the cross rhythm. The effect of this is beyond comprehension. The force of this