
MUSIC IN WEST AFRICAN CHURCHES

by E. G. PARRINDER

It has been estimated that some twenty million Africans have become Christians; more than the total number of Christians in all the countries of Asia. This great movement towards Christianity is undoubtedly due largely to the breakdown of traditional African ways of life. In West Africa Islam also has profited by the change to extend its sway, especially in Northern Nigeria and parallel territories but hardly at all in Eastern Nigeria or the lower Gold Coast.

The importance of music in African religious life is widely recognised, but this now needs to be considered in its modern forms and in the new religions which have largely replaced the old. It is curious that Islam, which bans all music in the mosque, should be so successful. But outside the mosque Muslims are notorious for their festivals and dances, and these have a great popular appeal. A full study of modern African Muslim music needs yet to be made.

In the West African Christian churches a great deal of use has been made of music. This has been according to the tradition of the missionary church, whether the revivalist hymns of Britain and America of the last two centuries, or the various old and new settings of the Latin chants of the Mass. Unfortunately the hymns and canticles have been translated, or rather transliterated, into the different African languages without any attempt being made at finding a poetical or musical form native to the language in question. The hymns of Wesley and Whittier have been turned almost word for word into Yoruba, Twi, Baoulé, and a hundred other tongues. They have been sung to the tunes of Sankey, Barnby, and the rest, which have no kinship with traditional African music. And the tragic result has been that these hymns are utter nonsense!

The translators of hymns seem to have taken no notice at all of the fact that most West African languages are tonal. The whole meaning of the words depends upon the use of the correct tone. Where, then, the translated words are wedded to a tune that takes no notice of the language tones, there must be constant clashes between rising tones and falling notes. This is indeed what happens constantly, with the sad consequence that the hymns are completely meaningless. All of them. They are quite incomprehensible to an outsider. And if a regular churchgoer is asked their meaning he has to think twice about the words, without the tune, before he can answer.

Many readers of this Journal will be familiar with these facts. But some of us have been making protests for years and seem to have made little impression. Yet a radical change must be made if religious music is not to die. Some small efforts can be seen towards a reform, and these are through new and comparatively simple compositions. Several of the principal hymnbooks, e.g. some of the Anglican and Methodist books, contain short supplements of "lyrics". These are short and simple hymns to tunes composed by a local musician.

More considerable efforts have been made by the veteran T. K. E. Phillips of Lagos Cathedral in composing new hymns to Yoruba tunes, as illustrated in his monograph *Yoruba Music* published by this Society. A Methodist minister has also recently been composing new Yoruba hymns. And now the Nigerian Broadcasting Service is stimulating the production and diffusion of new hymns in Yoruba, Ibo and other languages.

Outside the orthodox mission churches one finds the "separatist" sects which abound in so many parts of Africa (see my *Religion in an African City* for a description of some of these in Nigeria.) These tend more easily to revert to indigenous forms of music. Some of them do still use the hymn book of the mother church from which they broke away, but increasingly they use compositions by their own organists. "The African Church (Incorporated)" of Nigeria has its own book of some two hundred hymns of

local composition. These are sung with enthusiasm by the congregation, often swaying as they chant. Other sects have their own hymnbooks, printed locally, but borrowing hymns from other churches. Much of the music is in manuscript.

The musical instruments used in worship vary accordingly. In the mission churches the harmonium reigns supreme. Drums may be brought out on special occasions at harvest festivals or Christmas, but one has heard horror expressed at the idea of using calabashes in church. The more orthodox separatists may also have a harmonium; it seems a sign of progress. But they also use drums, triangles, double-mouthed gongs, and calabashes covered with a net holding beads or cowrie shells. In the more extreme sects, such as the Cherubim and Seraphim, there is usually no harmonium (probably no-one to play it), but drums and tambourines, calabashes and gongs. People clap and beat time with their hands.

The dance has also been frowned upon in the mission churches, though nowadays the larger churches permit it at special feasts. The narrower Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses still include dancing in their long list of taboos. But in the sects dancing flourishes; even during the hymn-singing of the Seraphim a man or a woman will get inspired and perform a little solo dance before the congregation. And everywhere the great church festivals provide opportunities for jigging up and down the church aisle, as well as bigger dances outside.

The sects have their churches, but they also go outside the towns to sacred hills where they pray and fast, sing and dance. On returning to the town they come in procession, dressed usually in white clothing, and singing their own hymns which have great popular appeal.

There are movements, therefore, towards a reform and naturalisation of church music in West Africa. Unfortunately those who are most aware of the need for change from the bad old ways are often too busy or not qualified to work at it themselves. African pastors are often more conservative than missionaries and tend to cling to the old hymns with which they were brought up. The sects are still much smaller numerically than the mission churches, though both are now largely under African control. Nevertheless the influence of the sectarian music is infectious, and together with the efforts of the few church pioneers and the work of the broadcasting services they may in time bring about the desired reform.
