

EXPERIMENTS IN INDIGENOUS CHURCH MUSIC AMONG THE BATETELA

by

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The Batetela tribe of the Kasai of the Belgian Congo was reached by Protestant missionaries forty years ago. They entered the territory around Wembo Nyama, and, establishing it as their point of departure, they set out in all directions ministering to the vast area of Otetela speaking people.

It is probably safe to assume that mission work began here in the same manner as in other parts of the Congo; the early missionaries found little or nothing in the old ways of the people upon which they could build the type of Christian faith which had been revealed to them. This was certainly true in the area of music. From the very earliest beginnings, as far as the author can discover, a strict ban was placed on all forms of native music, musical instruments, and rhythmical devices which were feared would encourage the people in their old practices. Thus began the "westernization" of music among the Batetela Christians.

As the missionaries became more or less fluent in the language, Western hymns translated into the native dialect were introduced in abundance. Strict care was taken that the melody and rhythm of the original hymn be retained. Unfortunately the same caution was not always exercised in the choice of words in the translation as regards their tone and syllable stress. As a result we have today a tremendous number of western hymns and gospel songs translated in rather good thought patterns, but when sung, they lose much of their effectiveness because the rhythmic pattern of the music does not fit that of the words. Only those who have had considerable contact with the mission find inspiration in singing these hymns because of their associational value. But to the ordinary villager, they are virtually ineffective.

As has been said, great care was taken to retain the original melody and rhythm of the hymns. No deviation was permitted. Adaptation or change of any kind was considered an error and was discouraged from the outset. This was particularly true if the adaptation had any of the characteristics of the tribal music. The singer would be reminded once again of the original melody of the hymn and would be asked to return to its use immediately. Opportunity for original thought was given in translating the lyrics, but no freedom of musical expression was allowed to develop. Thus a music which had been foreign to the Batetela became traditional and customary after nearly forty years of indoctrination and imitation.


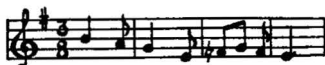
During the last few years, as an attempt was made to introduce into their thinking the importance of self-expression in song, the author encountered three very discouraging attitudes which had to be changed before any real work could begin. First of all, there was confusion. For so many years there had been one policy, one pattern, one traditional way. As always, when a new idea is introduced into such a situation, confusion results. Secondly, the people were reticent about accepting this new approach which had been discouraged through the years. They naturally related it to their attempts at hymn adaptation which had so often been tried and rejected. The third should have been anticipated. It proved to be the most difficult to overcome: antagonism on the part of the church people themselves. They felt secure in singing these foreign hymns which were completely divorced from their old patterns, and they did not want that security to be disturbed.

The classroom provides an excellent opportunity for experimentation. Various ways of introducing African rhythms and song forms were used as part of the classwork in the teacher training institute. Songs were brought in from other areas, such as certain

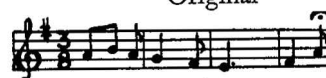
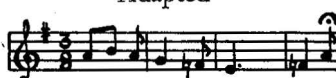
American Negro Spirituals whose form is obviously African in origin. Then African hymns from other parts of Africa where indigenous music is being used, and Western hymns which had been African-adapted. These hymns are based on Western melodies but have been altered in certain places to fit more closely the local modal pattern, or the rhythm has been changed to one which is more expressively African.

An example of change to fit the modal pattern is found in the traditional hymn, "We Three Kings of Orient Are"

(a)



Original		Adapted
	is changed to	

(b) At the modulation



Original		Adapted
	is changed to	

Two favourite changes in rhythm are made: 1. the use of triplets in place of a quarter note and two eighth notes; and 2. syncopation.

(1)

	is changed to	
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(2)

	is changed to	
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lend'endi na?

(na is an interrogation and not necessary for the sense).

lend'endi na?

lend'endi?

lend'endi?

NOTE: The examples given above are taken from adaptations of hymns in this area; changes which have persisted despite constant efforts to correct them.

The Negro Spirituals met with immediate success. They were sung by the institute choir with a good bit of spirit and were accepted by all factions of the congregation. Much care must be taken, however, in selecting ones which can be sung with some degree of understanding. Not all of them are appropriate since they represent not only African but other cultures as well.

Before singing an African melody, it was usually customary to make a few words of explanation about the author of the hymn, and from what region it came. Then the shock of hearing an African melody was not as great as though the congregation had been totally unprepared. Even with this type of preparation, it was brought to the attention of the director that perhaps it would be wise to use African melodies sparingly and that we must move slowly so that they would not be banned altogether.

Another effort to reacquaint their ears to their own musical sounds was made by allowing indigenous instruments in the school, both in the classrooms and for recreation nights. This proved to be very rewarding. Many students were found to be masters of the "dikembe" (hand piano), the musical bow and the marimba. The use of the bamboo pipes was particularly valuable in demonstrating their use of polyphony as opposed to Western harmony.

In listening again to their own instruments, the students began to understand more clearly what was meant by creating new melodies. Although there is a certain fixed repertoire of melodies which the artist uses, he very often will enrich his performance by improvising a new melody on the spot.

The students were asked to bring in original songs as part of the classwork activity. Their progress can be noted in a series of interesting stages of development: the first type of song was an imitation of Western hymns, usually based on one they already knew, and always following Western hymn-tune form. After a great deal of insistence to make the rhythm African, the next type was at least a step in the right direction, but equally as unacceptable as the first type. These were imitations or direct copies of cabaret music heard on the radio or from recordings with religious words added by the student.

It appeared that a comprehensive study of the basic differences between European and African song forms was needed. So, for the next two months, the class examined and compared examples of each type with gratifying results. Some very interesting discussions were held, and many of the mistakes that had been made in the past were laid directly to the ignorance of these basic differences. For instance, at a period around 1939 a highly trained choir had been developed at the teacher training school. The choir was well versed in Sol-Fa and had even performed Handel's Hallelujah Chorus through the medium of the Sol-Fa system. When the boys graduated from school and went out to teach, strange reports were sent back to the mission that these boys did not know the hymns they were assigned to teach, but were teaching other melodies to the words in the book. The fact was that the boys who sang bass in the choir were teaching the bass part, the tenors the tenor part, and the baritones the baritone part. So for each hymn, four different melodies were being taught. The result was a complete ban on all part singing on the mission, and again a return to the original hymn tune. The class discovered that in European harmony of the type used in hymns, one melody is important and the other parts are subordinate to it. Whereas in their own African forms, each melody added to the first melody is of equal importance and independent of it. It was felt that, at least in part, this explained why the boys in 1939 taught the students the part they sang in the choir instead of teaching the melody as we understand it. The students then tried more original melodies with much more understanding of what was needed, and made real progress in the right direction.

Badly sung hymns sung in unison are traditional in the church services among the Batetela people. Song leaders have been trained in Western song leading and a service in never held without someone to lead the hymns. The song leader holds a very important position.

Hornbostel's theory of the strong upbeat in rhythm as discussed by John Blacking in the 1935 issue of *African Music* holds true in this area. Even after considerable training in the strong downbeat, the strong upbeat still prevails. One finds very little co-ordination between the song leaders and the singers. The song leader usually stays with the accompaniment in a mechanical sort of way, but the congregation proceeds to pay little attention to either, and sings as it wishes. Strangely enough, the congregation is nearly always together, but neither the song leader nor the accompanist is responsible. Moreover, the strong downbeat is being perpetuated in the educational system. Little children are taught to beat time in the classroom as they sing, and here again the motions they make have nothing to do with what they are singing.

There is a marked difference in the result if the song leader forgets his formal training and begins beating with an upward movement on the strong beat. At present, the student director of the school choirs is being encouraged to direct in the way in which he feels the music, and his strong beat always takes an upward swing.

The problem now arises as to how the material learned in the classroom can be put into general use. The church services are, of course, for the adults. They are

conducted in the manner of a Western church. There is very little or no occasion to change the order of worship or the congregational singing. New ideas in music may, however, be presented by the school choirs in the period allotted to them.

The young people have their own meetings and more freedom in the order is allowed, but unless they are encouraged to do otherwise, they slip back into the pattern of the adult services because they are more familiar with it. Hope for progress in the future comes from several well-trained young people who have caught the vision and who, it is hoped, will lead the others as their generation comes into adulthood.

Another hope springs from the use of indigenous tunes by the people in outlying villages who have had little opportunity to learn the correct hymn tunes. They take the words they have learned and fit them to their own form of musical expression. If these efforts can be encouraged rather than discouraged from now on, there is hope for the emergence of a new and vital church music among the Batetela.

