

YORUBA RELIGIOUS MUSIC

by

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A Jesuit writer on mission theory wrote that he could not conceive how an African could worship God without dancing. We often hear nowadays of Mass chants being sung to the beating of tom-toms. To the surprise of European enthusiasts, African clergymen do not always react favourably to such developments. M. l'Abbé Idohou writes, "I will never have indigenous music inside my church where it is out of place, but I will give free rein without."¹

Can we dismiss such a reaction as due to inferiority complex? Or might it not be due to a misunderstanding about the true nature of African music? Discussing the reaction of M. l'Abbé in a letter, S. M. Katana points out that Africans have a particular type of ceremonial music which expresses "feelings of worship" and he gives as an example the ceremonial music of the Buganda and Bunyoro.²

Talbot, the anthropologist, wrote in 1943, describing his approach to a sacred grove in the Niger Delta: "The gay songs of the paddlers changed . . . taking on a graver note which merged at length into a kind of Gregorian Chant, indescribably solemn and impressive". Similar reactions to African ceremonial music are frequently met. Of the Barundi, we read in 'Grand Lacs': "Ces chants appelés 'Indirimbo', par leur simplicité et leur coupe ressemblent fort au plain chant."³ T. K. Phillips, in his book on Yoruba music, attempts to analyse the similarity of Yoruba religious music and Latin chant.

The Catholic Church has for nearly two thousand years retained a preference for Plain Chant in the central parts of the Liturgy. And I think that all people would be found to show this preference for a type of plain chant music in their solemn worship.

While I would not claim that African religious music is restricted to this solemn chant, I would think it should not be overlooked. T. K. Phillips, organist of the Anglican Cathedral in Lagos, wrote a letter to the *Daily Times* criticising the common fallacy that percussion is essential to African music, saying that he was pleased to hear the Catholics had begun to adapt the Yoruba pagan chant to Christian uses.

The present vernacular hymns used in the Catholic churches are translations of European hymns fitted to European tunes. When the French Fathers first translated these, it was not realised that Yoruba is an essentially tonal language, and that its tonal inflexion can never be ignored in music.

Hornbostel, discussing the Sudanic tone languages⁴, and taking Ewe as an example, came to the conclusion that "the chanted melody pays hardly any attention to the spoken one." This is certainly not correct for Yoruba.

African composers, sensitive to the inviolable tonal pattern of their language, have attempted to compose hymns which harmonise the melodic and spoken inflexions.⁵ Canon Ransome-Kuti of Abeokuta composed vernacular hymns which are said to have

¹African Music Society Newsletter. Vol. 1, No. 2, P.11.

²African Music Society Newsletter. Vol. 1, No. 3, P.43.

³White Fathers' Magazine, Belgium, Feb. 1949.

⁴Africa Vol. 1, P.37. Also "the pitches of the speaking voice indeed, appear to determine the melodic nucleus; but they have no influence upon its inborn creative forces. These forces and not any qualities of the speech, direct the further course of the melodic development."

⁵The Yoruba language is said to have three tones, and it might be thought that this would limit the range of melody. It would be more correct to say that Yoruba is related to three tone levels, which levels can rise or fall, narrow or widen. There is therefore a wide range of natural inflexion which can be represented in music by the notes of a musical scale.

been developed from native airs. T. K. Phillips, organist of the Anglican Cathedral, Lagos, has composed psalm tones, antiphons and canticles in the vernacular. Olude recently produced a very popular selection of hymns. These composers, influenced, I presume, by their harmoniums and organs, used European scales, harmonies and rhythms, and moreover, cast the words into European poetic forms.

Now at best, foreign musical and poetic idioms are a strait-jacket for the Yoruba language. For example, the stanza form, in which the same melody is repeated with new words, is practically impossible in a high tonal language. Olude has attempted this with great ingenuity, but it is a 'tour de force' and not a natural development. Again, the natural structure of Yoruba poetry is not built on metric patterns of stressed syllables, but on tone patterns, an idea strange to European poetic forms.

All these attempts have tried to force the Yoruba language into a foreign mould. A more natural form of adaptation has been made by some native Christian churches such as Aladura, in which much use is made of handclapping and swaying dance movements. European enthusiasts are inclined to accept such spontaneous religious music uncritically, but most missionaries and educated Africans are not so sympathetic. I think this is because they feel such a development lacks the control and discipline connected with the solemn religious ceremonial of any mature religion. I do not, however, suggest that these developments are of no value.

What is the nature of Yoruba religious music? There is no sharp dividing line between it and secular music. Dance rhythms and percussion instruments are often used in religious ceremonies. But there is a distinct type of serious and solemn music. In such music, the melodic line takes precedence over the more physical impulse of strong rhythmic phrases, and may supersede it completely. In its purest form, we have the flowing unisonous singing so reminiscent to the European listener of Latin plainchant. This type of music may be heard during ceremonies of birth, death, marriage, reverence of chiefs and the worship of spirits.

It may be useful to analyse this Yoruba chant in relation to Latin chant, pointing out their similarities and differences. Points of similarity are their solemnity, flowing melodic line and free rhythm, based on the natural rhythm of the words.

1. *Solemnity*—its serious atmosphere is created by the slow and deliberate nature of its choral execution. Herskovits finely describes similar music in Dahomey, sung by a group of women praising the royal ancestors: "these songs are sung in unison accompanied by only a gong; the training of the chorus is also to be remarked, for judged by any standards of 'a capella' singing, the technical proficiency of these groups of women, in unison of attack and in dynamics of shading, is of the highest."⁶

2. *Melodic line*—In its purest form it is monodic in structure, giving full value to a sustained melodic line.

3. *Free Rhythm*—The music is developed from the free rhythm of the spoken word, heightening the meaning rather than distracting from it. This is one of the reasons why plain chant is so suitable for serious liturgical music. This free rhythm of the words may be related to a slow hand-clap or beating of a gong, a slow dance movement or the beating of a drum, without losing its essential nature (as Latin plainchant was frequently adapted to metric verses). The purest forms, however, of both Latin and Yoruba chant are not related to any fixed rhythms or metres.

We must also take note of some differences between Latin and Yoruba chant, such as scale, tonal inflexion and syllabic form.

1. *Scale*—The traditional Yoruba music does not use any European scale. I cannot understand how T. K. Phillips finds a European Pentatonic scale in traditional Yoruba

⁶"Dahomey". Vol. 11. P. 322.

religious music.⁷ Many melodies have successions of close intervals (in the nature of half-tones) in the middle of the scale. The Pentatonic scale in use for some Anglican hymns is a European scale. I find that city children, when taught a traditional native song, tend to change the notes to the nearest note on the European scale without changing the nature of the music.

2. *Tonal Inflection*—Yoruba is a tonal language, Latin an accented one. The melody in Yoruba chant must represent the natural inflexion of the spoken word. There is no verbal accent independent of the melody. In Latin chant, the verbal accent must get full recognition.

3. *Syllabic Nature*—As a natural corollary of its tonal nature, Yoruba demands a syllabic melody. We cannot have neums (melodic phrases) on a syllable. We cannot have melismatic (ornamented) chant as in Gregorian music. Each syllable in Yoruba can have only one note, except in the sliding syllables which are represented by a sliding double note.

It is therefore clear, although in many ways there is a similarity between Latin and Yoruba chant, that it is no more possible to fit Yoruba words to a Gregorian melody than to a modern hymn tune.

One of the essential keys to the development of a native Christian music is the poet-musician. Words and music in this highly tonal language are so related that the musician and poet are one. The formal music student, even an African, would have to fully understand the native poetic as well as musical tradition before he could develop really African music.

I have concentrated on the more serious type of religious music in this article, because I feel that it is being neglected by students, Broadcasting Studios and recording units. Moreover, the Catholic Church has retained its preference for plain chant in its central ceremonies. However, in Christian life, we need a full range of music, from solemn to recreative, and contact must be maintained with the everyday music of the time.

We know the difficulties of introducing experiments in musical adaptation into the Church services. Religious drama, gives, I feel, a valuable area for experiment in developing the full range of African music for Christian use. It preserves the Church itself from being used as a research centre, and helps to prepare the people to accept their traditional music inside the Church. Drama, however, should not be confined to hall and stage, but have the same out-of-door freedom as the great dramatic tradition of the pagan religions.

In a recent encyclical on Church music (1956), Pope Pius has once again laid down the basic principles which must guide us:

“Let messengers of the Gospel in pagan lands freely promote . . . this love of religious chant which men committed to their care cherish; but in such a way that these people may replace their national religious songs . . . with similar sacred Christian hymns, by which the truths of the faith, the life of Christ our Lord, the praises of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of the Saints, may be known in language and melodies familiar to them.”

⁷Ref. his book “Yoruba Music”. Johannesburg.