

FUNERAL DIRGES OF THE AKAN PEOPLE, by J. H. NKETIA. Published by Achimota, Gold Coast, 1955. Blocks and Samples of musical transcriptions 296 pp. (Price not mentioned).

This excellent work marks a relatively new departure in the study of African songs because it is the critical analysis of an African art form by a mature African. No matter how well the foreigner may learn the language of the people he studies, he remains an observer from without. Mr. J. H. Nketia gives an objective account of the Funeral Dirges of his own country from the point of view of one who is not only an observer, but who also shares the emotional and spiritual virtues of the occasion.

The examples studied and translated into English come mostly from the Twi and Fante speaking peoples of the Gold Coast. From the first to the last page one is enveloped in the authentic atmosphere of a serious village tragedy, as a participant sharing in the symbolism through which the mourners express their personal sorrow and anguish and their public respect for the dead.

One of the more important elements in the celebration of an Akan funeral is the dirge, with its wealth of historic family or clan references. The author gives an admirable description of the social setting of the events surrounding a funeral describing in detail the behaviour patterns which are expected of relatives and other members of the community. In addition, he extracts the poetic elements of the dirge in a manner which no-one but a participant could emulate. It is perhaps in this regard that this work appears to be most significant.

There are delightful touches throughout the narrative which reveal intimate knowledge of the villagers, their little vanities and their frank enjoyment of the occasion as they unfold themselves in traditional action and conventional signs.

“. . . the singing of the dirge (by the women) is usually not an organised performance. . . . Each singer sings dirges of her own choice, often without regard to what others may be singing or how they may be singing them.”

“Women mourners do not stop their dirges while the funeral lasts but there is nothing to prevent them from taking a good rest from time to time.”

If a woman failed to sing a dirge at the funeral “she would be badly criticised, and possibly suspected of having something to do with the death.”

“A good singer wins in emotional appeal, she moves her audience . . . mock-sadness is discouraged. A tear should fall, lest you are branded a witch or a callous person. If a tear is physiologically difficult to shed, you must induce it by some means; . . . it would be better to have the marks of tears on your face than nothing at all.”

The imagery of much of the texts of the dirges is largely meaningless to those who do not belong to the community and its continuity. Yet even in translation, shorn of the tonal beauty of the actual words in the vernacular, there are many arresting passages which demonstrate the ability of their composers to create poetic allusion.

On the other hand, faced with so much material which can contain significance for only a select and limited few, in particular the constant genealogical references liberally sprinkled throughout most of the songs, one must inevitably draw the conclusion that the dirges of the Akan, in common with so many other African praise songs, are not to be assessed by either their literary quality or their ultimate meaning, but rather by their effectiveness in evoking or demonstrating community of interests, feelings and actions within local society.

That the true assessment of their success in this direction can only be gauged by sensitive and cultured Africans has been clearly demonstrated by the appearance of this book, which one hopes will be the forerunner of many similar studies.

H.T.

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PUBLICATIONS WHICH CONTRIBUTE TO THE STUDY OF NEGRO MUSIC IN AMERICA

During recent years, African and Afro-American studies have received a great impulse at the hands of many students and scholars of this new branch of Ethnology which in South America is called “Afro-Americanística”. Among these studies, Negro music has attracted the attention of many scholars, and has given rise to the publication of several books and booklets in the three Americas over a period of a decade or so.

Among these books one must first mention the monumental work of Dr. Fernando Ortiz, the well-known Cuban anthropologist, entitled ‘*Los Instrumentos de la Musica Afro-Cubana*,’ a work in five volumes, with a total of more than two thousand pages. This book is unique in its bibliography of Negro music, and is written with an erudition which is always a characteristic of the work of this doyen of Afro-American studies. The five volumes were published in La Habana between 1952 and 1955.

Two other books by the same author saw the light in 1950 and 1951. I refer to ‘*La Africana de la Musica Folklorica*’ and ‘*Los Bailes y el teatro de los Negros en el Folklore de Cuba*’.

Also concerning Afro-Cuban music, an interesting book by the Cuban musicologist, poet and novelist Alejo Carpentier, entitled ‘*La Música en Cuba*’. It was published in Mexico in 1946, and the author deals not only with folk music, but also with the work of the best-known Cuban musicians from the past up till the present day.