

African and Western forms, but there is a genuine interest among this group in preserving the folk music tradition and in recreating it for the new forms of social life and the institutions which have emerged through our contact with the West.

In contemporary life, the new traditions that are being created and the old tradition exist side by side along with imported music from Europe and the other side of the Atlantic. All these traditions are contextually distributed in such a way as to make them complementary. Different institutions make use of different musical traditions. The institution of Government still carries under its wings the Western military band and a National Anthem in the idiom of Western music, while the institution of chiefship maintains the African drum orchestra and continues to flourish its traditional fanfares of ivory horns.

Cafés, night clubs, ballrooms make use of varieties of the new Ghana music as well as African derived music, while old style music continues to be used at African ritual and ceremonies.

Whatever may be said about the quality of the new music that is being created or the efforts of musicians to find an answer to the problem of social change, there can be no doubt of the social importance of the experiments that are being made, experiments which need to be guided if they are to prove worthy of the new African.

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## MUSICAL MEMORIES OF NIGERIA

by

THE REV. BRIAN KINGSLAKE

*"The women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing . . . with tabrets, with joy, and with instruments of music"* (I Samuel, 18:6).

I was sent out to Nigeria in 1945/6 to inspect and report on the New Church Mission, of which I was secretary in England. It was run by an African Superintendent, who took me around. I had no car, because they were difficult to come by, so soon after the war; anyway, most of our mission stations were far away from motor roads. The villages all over the country are linked together by a network of ancient narrow footpaths worn deep in the sandy soil, with elephant grass, bamboo clumps, or the high green wall of the forest on both sides. For miles we would foot it along these paths, preceded by a dozen porters carrying our baggage on their heads. Sometimes I would travel by bicycle taxi: you sit sideways on a padded carrier, while the taxi-driver pedals. ("First class" he pushes you up the hills; "second class" you get off with him and walk.) For longer journeys I sat in the cab of transport lorries full of sacks of cocoa beans, with twenty black passengers sitting inside on the sacks. In the mangrove creeks of the Niger Delta, we travelled for hundreds of miles in the mission dug-out canoe: two deck chairs under an awning, with paddlers or "pullers" at stem and stern.

Was I lonely, away from all white contacts for six months? No; because I keenly shared the two main folk-interests of the country, Religion and Music. Every Nigerian gets a kick out of music, and puts a kick into it! In Lagos, the mere quantity of sound rising up to heaven is terrific—one needs ear plugs! And anywhere in the whole country, at any time of day or night, if you listen you can hear singing and the thudding of drums. Your lorry passes through a village at night; by the roadside little palm-oil

lamps burn on tables piled with miscellaneous goods (the shops); soon you see the glare of a pressure-lamp, and a circle of black bodies swaying and jiggling to the beat of drums, and singing to the rhythm. You eventually stop in the forest for some sleep, and set up your camp bed and mosquito net under a tree. The other passengers light a fire and sit round for a sing-song. Nature's orchestra provides the accompaniment: the hum of mosquitoes, the ringing of cicadas, and the police-rattle of the frogs. Drums somewhere in the background, and from the camp fire a drowsy organum in consecutive fifths: Africa talking in her sleep!

Most of the instruments I heard were percussive. There were the ordinary tomtom and drum, and some extraordinary drums carved for juju ceremonial. There were logs of wood hollowed out through a slot, with one "cheek" thinner than the other and thus giving a higher note when struck. Then there was the *Ilu* or *dundun* drum. The wooden part is shaped like an hour glass; there is a skin head at each end, the skins being joined together all round by thonging. You hold it under your left arm and strike the upper head with a drumstick curved like a crane's bill; by squeezing and relaxing the arm pressure on the thongs, you can raise or lower the pitch of the note. The result is an intriguing "pop pop pop" running with great mobility up and down over a range of a full fifth. This instrument is used also as a "talking drum" for conveying messages. Rattles? All sorts. One like a pepper pot containing seeds. One a gourd or calabash covered with a bead net which rattles beautifully when shaken. Or a species of nut shells strung together, which make an almost deafening row. Then there are gongs: round, square or flat, of iron or brass. Every senior Chief has his private band, which plays perpetually; also a bard to sing his praises. There are traditional songs for every occasion: birth, initiation, marriage, death, the propitiation of ancestors, and so on. Cult groups have their own songs; and different kinds of song are sung with a different quality of voice.

Our mission, unlike some, permitted percussion bands in church, and I shall never forget my astonishment at first seeing the surpliced choir boys filing in, carrying not only the traditional gong but bottles and jars hanging from strings and old tin cans! And to hear the familiar tune of "*Abide with me*" or the "*Old Hundredth*" sung against a complex background of syncopated claptrap was a revelation.

The setting of Yoruba words to European melodies is discouraged by the African Music Society, and rightly so. Yoruba is a highly tonal language. Every syllable must be pronounced on one of three possible tones: a high pitch, a middle pitch, or a low pitch—as it were *soh*, *me* or *doh*; and a word can mean several totally different things, or nothing, according to the tones employed. "*Lo fo awo nyen*" may mean either "Go and wash that plate" or "Go and break that plate", according to the relative pitch of the *o* in "*fo*". So a change of vocal note may transform "God made us" into "God betrayed us". Obviously, then, to force a Yoruba sentence into a fixed melody with its own ups and downs, will make nonsense of it. Our African Superintendent, however, denied this vehemently. He claimed that he could assign the correct tonal value to a syllable, even though the tune was going in the other direction. When I argued the matter, he retorted: "Oh, you are a foreigner and cannot understand our language. *We* hear the words perfectly when we sing them, because they are our mother tongue". Actually, of course, he knew the meaning of the words beforehand, and was only imagining he was assigning the correct tones to them. If an outsider had come into the church and tried to understand the meaning of what was being sung, he would probably have been utterly bewildered.

At certain points during the long service, the Superintendent would announce: "The ladies will now sing an African lyric". Immediately one of the senior women would plunge into an improvised chant. The words would be a reconstruction of the Bible reading or of my sermon, or whatever came into her head. At the end of a phrase, everyone would join in a chorus—the congregation seemed to take fire, which glowed and spread to the remotest corners. Then the soloist would sing again. The chorus was

the same throughout the song (e.g., "Jesus Christ is God") and provided a fixed framework which unified the whole. These improvised melodies were very interesting, because they actually did follow the rise and fall of the tones of the words, and the stress and rhythm of the spoken language. They were "musical thinking" and were fascinating in their own way. Yet it must be admitted that melody is never at its best when dominated by the exigencies of the words; it must be free to follow the laws of its own nature. It is therefore unlikely that vocal music will ever develop satisfactorily in a tonal language.

Much has been written about the mediaeval character of Yoruba music. This derives partly from its peculiar modal quality (that is to say, it moves around in modes other than our familiar major and minor scales.) But I was even more impressed by the fact that its intervals are untempered. That is to say, they approximate to the natural intervals of the harmonic series, such as were used in mediaeval Europe. All our keyboard instruments nowadays have had their intervals ironed out, so that our western ears are accustomed to semitones of a fixed frequency ratio, which are certainly not found in Africa!

If the Yoruba folk are musical, those in the creeks of the Niger Delta are much more so. Here every island has its own characteristic songs and dances which have been handed down from ancient times. Many of these are associated with masks ("masquerades"). At one place I saw a dancer wearing an enormous fish head-dress, and making sinuous movements like a fish swimming under water. On another island the principal dancer was dressed up in Papageno fashion as a blowsy feathered bird. These masquerades originally had a religious significance, but now are a pure ballet, or else just fun. At Degema, a big dance was thrown in my honour, at which the Devil himself was present. Not me, but a masked figure representing his Highness. He had a black head with horns and a gaping maw containing two uvulas; knives instead of hands, rattles round his calves, and a fiend's tail. He spent most of the time chasing the girls!

At this dance, the "drummer" had no conventional drum, but a set of earthenware pots of different sizes ranged around him. By striking them on the open mouth with a palm-leaf fan, he caused the air column inside to vibrate, producing a soft percussive note, varying in pitch according to the size of the pot. With a fan in each hand he played thus on the pots with lightning rapidity, causing the quantity of tone to pile up until it could easily be heard all over the dance arena; and I was told he could control the dance steps most perfectly by the way he played. The men formed an enormous circle and began to dance, led by the Chief in a battered pith helmet looking like a derelict Jan Smuts. I was told to press 6d. on his perspiring forehead; he held it there with his wrinkles until it dropped, then he stooped down to rescue it and was bumped into by the man behind. Suddenly a dancer leapt into the ring and performed a wild *pas seul*, toaming at the mouth and finally falling on the ground, to be revived with a calabash of palm wine. Later, the men would sit down and the girls would form the circle and dance. They wore skirts of local cotton weave, dyed with local indigo; and blouses and head-scarves of bought rayon in shades of pink, blue, mauve and yellow—like flowers. They looked charming, and it was quite a shock when these elegant young ladies lent forward and stuck out their bottoms and wobbled them! One can imagine the sensation if Pavlova or Markova had performed this figure when dancing the "Dying Swan", yet I have seen swans do exactly that when they have come up out of the water. The most beautiful dance that day was the canoe dance. Each lady was provided with a miniature canoe paddle tied with coloured streamers, and they all moved together, twisting their lithe bodies and dipping the paddle to left, to right—one could almost feel the ripple of water under the keel. The words of the song were interpreted for me, as follows: "We are paddling our canoe; and the Lord is the Chief Paddler" (a technical term for the leader of the team); "He is leading us on."

One thing I noticed in the creeks was a tendency to sing in 3rds/6ths as well as the

more usual 4ths/5ths; and once you have 3rds you are on the way to harmonizing—for the interval of a 3rd is the basis of all block harmony. Some of these people even discovered how to resolve a discord: e.g., a dominant 7th, 9th, and even 12th dropping to the tonic triad (G, F, A and D, resolving to C, E, G.) I have heard canoe “pullers” sing such a resolution, and then, after a G. P. of two or three strokes, sing it again, and so on, *da capo*, repeated over and over again for several hours, matching the monotony of the mangrove swamps we were penetrating. The effect was hypnotic, and even ecstatic. Vertical harmony of this character is rare in primitive Africa.

My last memory is of a procession from Abua to the neighbouring village of Egbolom. Having had the honour of being appointed an honorary Chief, I was wearing my robes—a kind of grey flannel ‘nightie’, plus clerical collar and white topee (very smart!) I and the local clergy walked under a giant umbrella; the Women’s League followed behind carrying a large silk banner on two poles. We proceeded under the juju arch (designed to keep out evil spirits) and through the cassava fields beneath the tattered leaves of banana trees. The ladies provided the band—mostly tomtoms and pepper-pot rattles, with which they measured out a phrase in three/four time: “*Dum*, ticker ticker”. This had to synchronise with two marching steps, yielding a persistent cross-rhythm. Against the “*Dum*, ticker ticker” we sang an exultant melody in four/four time, the words of which meant: “The angels clapped their hands and shouted, Blessed be the name of God. Ye-i-ye-i-ye” (count 5 steps in silence) “Ye-i-ye-i-ye” (count 6 steps). Repeat *ad lib*. For myself, I was so preoccupied with trying to fit in the rhythms and counting the pauses, that I didn’t notice the distance, and soon we encountered the procession from Egbolom which had come to meet us. What happened then, and how the newcomers tried to embrace me, is not a musical memory and need not be recorded in this Journal.

It was usual in those days for missionaries to condemn African music as “rooted in paganism”. No; it is rooted in the psycho-physical nature of the African people. If the people are pagans, then their singing and dancing are indeed mixed up with skull worship, ritual murders, human sacrifice by torture, and ancestor propitiation. But if they look to the Lord, then (like David) they dance before Him. The African Music Society, which is using its influence to keep African music in full flood, is of inestimable value in helping us missionaries to understand the African’s essential nature and spiritual needs. I said just now that Religion and Music were the two main folk-interests of Nigeria. They must go hand in hand.

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## THE ATILOGWU DANCE

by

MERCEDES MACKAY *in collaboration with* AUGUSTINE ENE

This dance is now being seen quite frequently in London and some other European cities, and is especially welcome to those interested in African culture. For years the more serious minded of us were not permitted to see the virile West African dances in their original form because it was feared by their African exponents that they would give the impression of being “primitive” in the derogatory sense of that word. But a better form of nationalism is now evident, with splendid musicians like Ghanaian Philip Gbeho, and Nigerian E. L. Lasibikan proudly showing African culture to the world in its untampered form. Africans are becoming less ashamed of a naked torso than a Scot is ashamed of his naked knees and thighs when he dons his traditional kilt.