BOOK REVIEWS

"THE STORY OF SACRED WOOD CARVINGS FROM ONE SMALL YORUBA TOWN", by H. U. Beier, edited by D. W. Macrow. Printed at Yaba, and published by the Nigeria Magazine, Marina, Lagos (No price given).

This slender book, consisting of a monograph of 13 pages of close letterpress and 53 superb photographs, tells of the enormous wealth of wood carvings to be found in every town and village of Western Nigeria—not tourist stuff, but actually in use in the cultural life of the people. The author takes as an example a small town called Ilobu in the Oyo district, which he considers typical of hundreds of others in the Yoruba country—a town which had until recently a population of only 10,000, though now three times that number; and he gives a comprehensive account, with photographs, of the numerous sacred wood carvings to be found in its shrines and private houses.

He begins with a valuable discussion of the religious philosophy of the Yoruba, and an account of their worship of those semi-mythical tribal ancestors called "*Orisa*" who have become infused with divine attributes from the High God, and so are now by derivation "gods" (though also remaining very human!) The worshipper chooses the Orisa that best suits his personality, and seeks to intensify his own life by becoming one with, or "possessed" by, the god, thus establishing a constructive relationship with the forces behind the universe. The wood carvings associated with the cults are not idols or fetishes, nor have they any magical attributes; they merely "embellish the shrine, create atmosphere, and stimulate religious feeling." (cf. statues of saints in Roman Catholic cathedrals.) They do not inspire fear, but joy and dancing and singing, and are much loved by the children. The carvings stand from two to four feet high, and although some must be sixty or seventy years old, they are preserved in excellent condition by being washed every fourth day (the Yoruba Sabbath) and painted and dressed up annually for the Festival of Images when all are carried in joyful procession to the king's palace.

The author describes, in popular language, each of the Orisa cults practised in Ilobu and their associated cult objects. Added to some of the human figures are charming and imaginative little horses, and fat dogs with crocodile jaws. There are numerous "Ibeji"—tiny wooden images which take the place of deceased twins; also carved wooden boxes and mortars, and the masks used in dances for contacting the spirits of the dead and getting messages through. Also there are a few lively though crude little grinning brass figurines probaly associated with the ancient earth worship taken over from the indigenous people who occupied Nigeria before the Yoruba conquest.

This book provides a fascinating introduction to African art for the uninitiated European. Yoruba sculpture is not difficult to understand, especially when seen in its natural setting, away from the mothballs and glass cases of the museum. Despite the conventional distortions of the human figure (enormous heads with bulbous eyes covered with tin foil; shrunken limbs, and the diminutive horse held between the knees like a football) it is based on naturalistic realism. "The round swelling forms seem to be pushed out by the rising pressure from within," but they are not deliberately grotesque nor merely symbolic. Though one feels oneself in a strange world (a world, for example, in which a flute player stands quite naturally on another flute player's head) it is an intensely human world. "The expression (on the figure's face) is that of a worshipper just after the mystical union with the god, resulting in a complete harmony of the soul, an utter relaxation of the mind and balance of the personality. The carver is always striving to express this relaxation and balance. He has no time for the emotions of everyday life, like laughter and anger and so on."

Few new carvings are now being produced. Islam and Christianity have undermined the prestige of the traditional beliefs, and a cash economy is compelling the wood carver to convert himself into the commercial carpenter; if he does produce a carving, it is tossed off too quickly in soft wood susceptible to white ants. One of the major tragedies of our beloved Africa is that Christianity is sapping the art impulse of the people. Is this inevitable? The author thinks not, and points out that the ancient Greek culture was pagan but it nevertheless inspired Christian Europe for centuries. However, the recession will have to be halted soon or it will be too late.

A minor criticism of the editing: Why do we have to fumble to the end of the book, beyond the plates, to find that so-and-so is "a town in Oyo province"? Far better to put these small textual notes at the foot of the page. And why are photographs of the same carving or shrine separated, as is often the case, by several pages of other plates? But these are small matters, and one is filled with amazement that a production of this high quality should have come from a Nigerian press.

B. KINGSLAKE

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FOLK MUSICIANS IN UGANDA, *by* K. P. Wachsmann, Ph.D. (Uganda Museum Occasional Paper No. 2); the Uganda Museum, Kampala, 1956.

This important paper forms a preliminary report on the work which has been carried out under the "Music Research Scheme R.233," authorised in 1948 for the regional collection of folk-music. The research

began with a survey of the musical instruments of Uganda, the results of which were published in Part II of Tribal Crafts of Uganda (Trowell and Wachsmann, 1953)—a very useful work.

But, since the inception of Scheme 233, hundreds of recordings of folk-music have been made, and the present paper deals generally with conclusions arrived at by Dr. Wachsmann from the examination of this material.

The paper abounds in significant remarks, particularly the section on "Some Characteristics of Music in Uganda," from which I quote a couple. One of these, which contains a truth which ought to be obvious to anyone who really thinks about the subject, is:

"Uganda might claim, not only geographically but musically, a place between West Africa and the Orient."

The second is equally significant. It is:

"Of course the music of Africa, with all the diversity of its peoples and their histories, can no more be a uniform concept than the music of the 25 Uganda tribes can be reduced to a common formula."

Both these statements put in a nutshell two of the major problems in the study of African music.

Among Dr. Wachsmann's conclusions, which are, be it noted, based on thorough examination both in the field and in the study of a great mass of folk-music, are several which well deserve to be underlined. In discussing the tuning of native musical instruments, a matter which was carefully investigated, Dr. Wachsmann, although expressing the opinion that the native musicians obviously had in their minds "ideal tunings" to which they endeavoured to attain, adds significantly what has always been true in all countries and in all ages, "of course folk musicians do not think physics," and consolidated this statement by the still more important one: "As to standard pitch, none has been found."

The whole paper is in many respects quite provocative, and therein lies a good deal of its value. For if a serious attempt is made to answer the questions raised by Dr. Wachsmann, we shall be well on our way to a far better understanding of the true nature of African musics, particularly those of the central nations of the continent.

P. R. KIRBY

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THE KALELA DANCE; ASPECTS OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP AMONG AFRICANS IN NORTHERN RHODESIA, *by* J. Clyde Mitchell (The Rhodes-Livingstone Papers No. 27), Manchester University Press (preface dated June, 1956).

This is a remarkable study of an unusual type of tribal dancing which occurs on the Copperbelt of Northern Rhodesia, and which has achieved overwhelming popularity there.

In sharp contrast to the somewhat consciously costumed social dances which are regularly seen on the Witwatersrand, the *Kalela* dance of the Copperbelt natives would appear to the ordinary observer as rather prosaic in character.

The Bisa team of dancers who were studied by Clyde Mitchell were, as is usual in this dance, attired in complete European costume, and they executed their movements to the accompaniment of an ensemble of three drums made from large oil-containers with "heads" of cowhide.

All the nineteen dancers in the team, with the exception of the "King" or leader, were young men, and, in spite of their smart attire, none were of the "lower professional" class.

At one point in the dance the drumming ceases and the participants sing a song, of which Clyde Mitchell recorded fourteen stanzas in 1951. These stanzas, sung in the Bemba of the Copperbelt, in which many anglicisms occur, are both witty and topical, and hence tend to be dropped after a time and replaced by others.

Their significance, however, is undeniable, for they reflect in the frankest manner the life led by these people on the Copperbelt, and, moreover, they indicate, by their almost Chaucerian omission of references to tribal life and their concentration on that of urban areas, the changing nature of the social outlook of the people. For, as Clyde Mitchell points out, the precursors of the *Kalela* dances were "a sort of pantomime of the social structure of the local European community", and that they are symbolical of the fact that in these days, prestige among the native peoples depends upon the closeness with which they follow the European way of life. Having come to this significant conclusion, Clyde Mitchell supports it with a fully documented analysis of the whole social picture of which the *Kalela* dance forms a part, an analysis which is well worth careful study.

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